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A MOUNTAIN MYSTERY;

or The Outlaws of the Rockies.

By

Lawrence L. Lynch

CHICAGO
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—OR—

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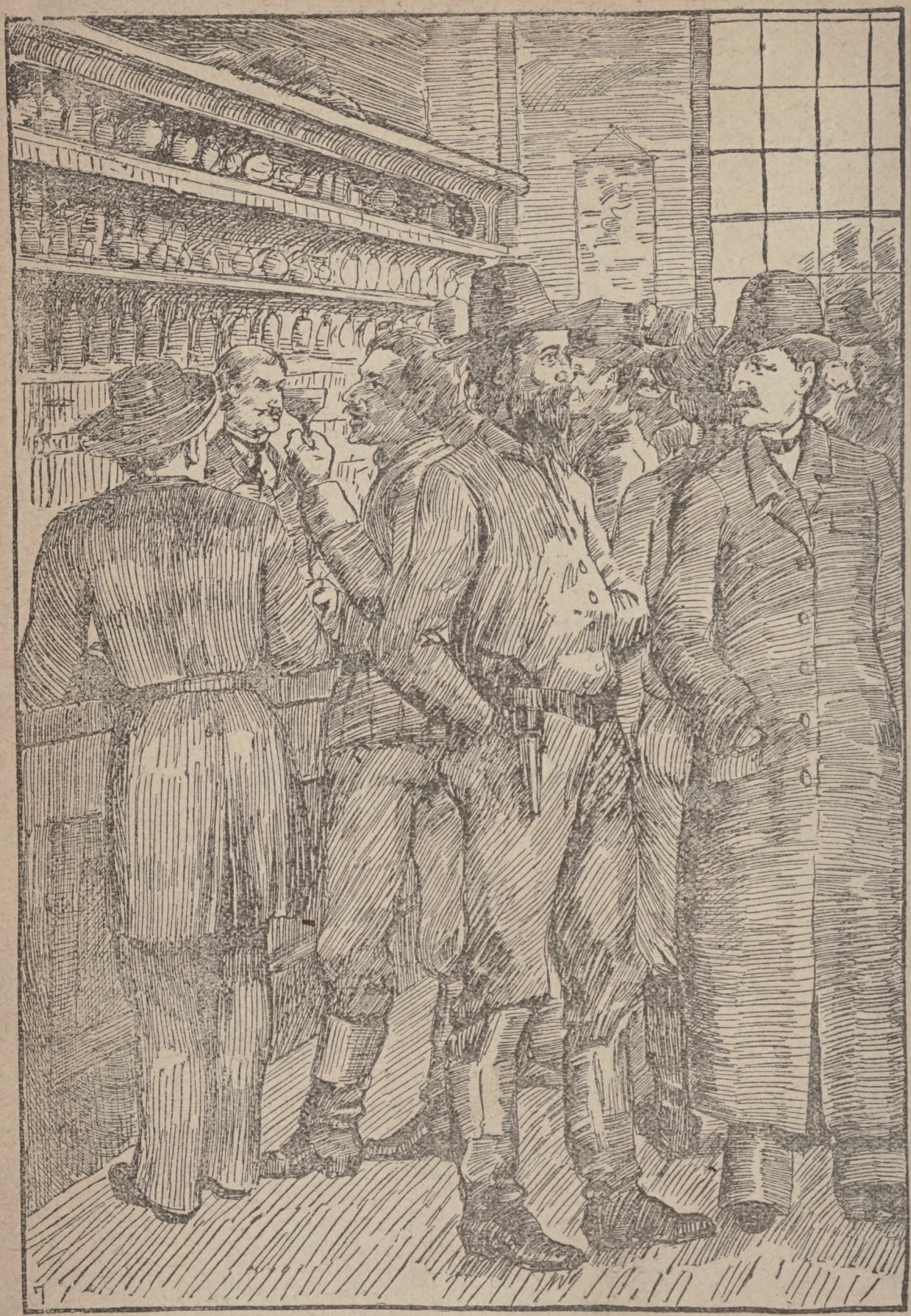

Dick, what have you struck?" "Trouble!" answered Podunk.—Page 77.

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THE OUTLAWS OF THE ROCKIES

BY

LAWRENCE L. LYNCH

(E. M. Van Deventer)

Author of "Shadowed by Three," "The Lost Witness," "A Slender Clue," "The Romance of a Bomb-Thrower," "Madeline Payne," "Out of a Labyrinth," "Dangerous Ground," "The Diamond Coterie," &c.

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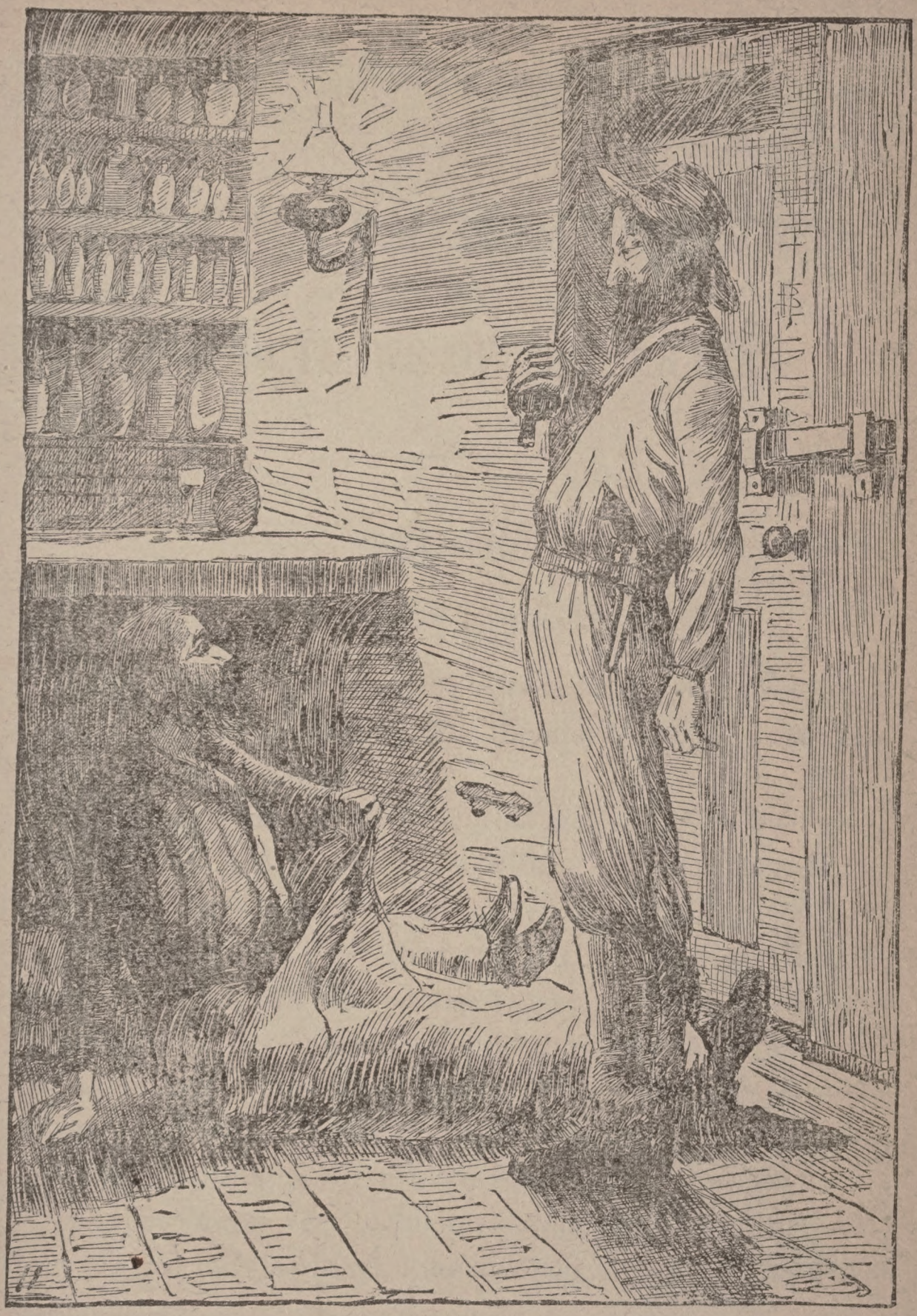


"Tis zempty now, Mazhur," he said solemnly.—Page 180

A MOUNTAIN MYSTERY;

OR,

THE OUTLAWS OF THE ROCKIES.

CHAPTER I.

BETWEEN TWO DAYS.

In the "outpost" town of Caledonia, in the year of eighteen hundred and seventy-four, the inhabitants turned night into day, and day into night.

Nearly all that happened in this facetiously named town, for a town it had grown to be within less time than it has taken to erect one of our great public buildings, happened, in Caledonia parlance, "between two days." It might, also, be added that about all that occurred here was more or less bad, for somebody; for Caledonia, founded, sustained and inhabited by adventurers, miners, gamblers, freebooters, the purgings of the East, was, in point of morals, manners, law and order, all that a thriving Eastern town should not and would not be.

Murders were very common happenings in Caledonia; they created only a ripple, a momentary stir in that hardened community.

The robbery of a stage-coach, the discovery of a new mine among the mountains to the westward; the opening of a new

gambling hell, the advent of a new star at "Mack's" Varieties, was of far greater and more lasting interest.

Of these four last-named happenings, the two first were of frequent occurrence, and the third came about sufficiently often, while the last came to pass at rarer intervals, and, in the opinion of many Caledonians, was the most interesting event of all.

But, common as murders had become, the murder of Duke Selwyn shook Caledonia to its very centre, for it was an uncommon murder, and Duke Selwyn was an uncommon man.

Stella Aubrey, represented on the bills at Mack's Varieties as the "*champion danseuse*," and *La Belle Florine*, similarly advertised as the "charming serio-comique," waited, at three o'clock in the morning, on the corner just outside the entrance to the "Varieties", for Billy Piper, who was lighting a cigar at the bar within, and when he rejoined them took their way across the muddy street homeward.

"Let's cut over to the Delmonico," suggested Stella Aubrey, "and get something warm."

"I am warm enough," replied La Belle Florine, petulantly, "and I am too sleepy to open my mouth. Come along home. I believe you could eat all the time, Aubrey."

Aubrey was silenced, and Billy Piper was sure to agree with Florine. So they kept straight on down the street, and toward the big barn-like building known as the Theatrical Boarding-house Their way lay past a new "block," fresh with paint, where here and there a light glimmered through the upper panes, behind which lurked the "Tiger", and over a stretch of common, where the workmen had begun to excavate, leaving little mounds of earth flung dangerously near the footpath. The Caledonians in this vicinity had not yet

awakened to the need of sidewalks, and half-dug cellars yawned as traps for the unsteady of foot.

"What's that?" said Stella Aubrey sharply, as they came abreast of the first heap of earth. "Listen, Billy!"

They all stopped instinctively, and, almost at the instant, the sound was repeated—low, but painfully distinct; something between a gurgle and a groan.

"Oh!" cried Florine, "it's right here at our feet somewhere! I daren't move!"

The man peered about him through the morning darkness.

"Can't be any one's tumbled into these holes," he said, beginning to fumble in his pockets. "Not a match! Stand still, girls." And he began to go slowly forward, putting out a foot, and moving it from side to side with great caution before setting it firmly down. "I say, hello! what's the matter? Anybody hurt?"

There was no answer, and Billy halted.

"It sounded like somebody in distress," he said doubtfully.

"It *was* somebody in distress," affirmed Stella positively. "It was *awful!* The first was worse than the other. We can never go home till we find out what's the matter, Billy. Hark!"

Some one was approaching on horseback; the animal was walking, and was only a few paces away. They could see a ray of light at the saddle-bow.

"Halt," called Billy Piper, "you with your bull's eye; give us a light, won't you? Something's wrong here."

The horse was reined close to the path, and the light of the bull's eye was turned full upon them.

"What's the matter?" asked a clear voice; "any one hurt?

Whoa, Nick!"—this last to the horse, which had cavorted so close to Florine that she drew back with a scream.

"We've heard groans," said Billy Piper, coming forward. "Why, it's you, Mag! Just let me take your lamp."

The rider leaned forward, with the lantern held toward him, then drew back quickly as a third groan, faint, but distinctly heard by each, sounded very near them. The grasp upon the bridle must have tightened involuntarily, for the animal reared and bounded into the street. But the lantern did not fall from the rider's hand. Instead, they heard two or three stinging blows from a riding-whip, and then the horse came meekly back to the group in the footpath, and, in an instant, the rider sprang from the saddle and stood beside them, lantern in hand.

"Steady, Nick!" she said, releasing the bridle, and then, without a word to the others, went straight toward the first heap of earth.

"It sounded here," she said, turning on the full light of the small bull's eye lantern, and flashing it about her.

Nothing was visible near the mound, and she passed it, and the next one, and looked down into the cellar. Instinctively the others followed. At the cellar's edge they saw her pause and bend low. And then, after one brief glance, she sprang downward and disappeared.

Coming quickly to the cellar, Billy Piper looked down. He could see a long dark figure outstretched upon the damp sand, and the woman he had addressed as Mag, kneeling beside it, her back toward him. In a moment she arose and came forward, lifting the lantern high, and showing them, thus, a strong, handsome, pallid face, and two burning black eyes.

"Halt!" called Billy Piper, "you with your bull's-eye; give us a light."
Page 13.

The hand that held the lantern shook, and the voice was not quite firm that said:

"It's Duke Selwyn—dead."

"Duke Selwyn!"

"*Dead!*"

"We heard his last groan. He's been shot, I think."

She moved along the cellar wall until she came to an easy place of exit, an incline of earth up which she bounded.

"Some one must go back to Mack's," began Billy Piper. "Are you sure it's Selwyn?"

"Too sure' You run to Mack's; I'll stay here."

"Oh," whispered Florine, "Billy, what shall *we* do?"

"Go home," said the strange woman sternly. "*You* can't mend trouble: you only make it."

The two girls, too thoroughly alarmed to venture upon a retort, obeyed a word and a gesture from Billy Piper, and went, trembling, away from the spot, and toward the boarding-house at the outer edge of the common. As soon as they had turned their faces thither, Billy Piper said:

"Now I'm off for Mack's: there'll be plenty of help there." And he ran swiftly away.

For a moment the woman he had addressed as Mag stood moveless beside the cellar. Then, as at first, she flashed her lantern about the place and sprang downward. There, alone in the darkness, she knelt once more beside the dead man, and her right hand worked swiftly while the left held aloft the bull's-eye.

A dark silk handkerchief protruded from the breast pocket; she drew this out quickly, and spread it beside her with a deft movement. Then she lifted the dead hand, and drew a flashing diamond from the little finger, putting it upon the bit of

silk at her side. This done she put the bull's-eye down, as if she had seen enough and could now work without its aid. Rapidly, with both hands, she detaches a heavy chain from the waistcoat, and draws a gold watch from its pocket. These she puts beside the ring, and then snatches out a scarf pin, that glistens with three small diamonds like tiny eyes. In another moment they are hastily wrapped in the handkerchief, and thrust within the loose folds of her blouse-like waist. Then, drawing a sharp, quick breath, she takes up the bull's-eye, and hastens out from the cellar.

Not a moment too soon, for lanterns are flashing and moving toward her. She hears approaching voices, and knows that only the sheltering piles of earth have shut from sight the movements of her lantern.

CHAPTER II.

DUKE SELWYN.

Billy Piper, the stage manager and general comedian of the "Varieties", arrived at that temple of amusement breathless and flushed with excitement. A dozen men were lounging about the saloon, and, through a double door at one side, twice as many more might have been seen sitting and standing about the gaming tables, for Mack's attractions were various indeed, and his "Varieties" meant not only theatre, concert-hall and beer graden, combined, but gambling, fisticuffs, and cock fighting, each in its season.

Piper's entrance interrupted an uproarious burst of hilarity;

for Mack himself, the deity of the place, had relieved the sleepy and more than half tipsy barkeeeper, and, being in one of his genial moods, was putting new life into things.

He had just uttered one of those coarse sallies for which he was famous, at the expense of some one too weak or too unpopular to dare venture a retort, and was standing behind his bar, with a glass in either hand, the one elevated, the other lowered, in an attitude familiar to all his customers, when Billy made his entrance; and he saw at a glance that something had happened.

"What's up, Billy?" he called sharply.

"Murder!" panted the messenger. "Some one has killed Duke Selwyn!"

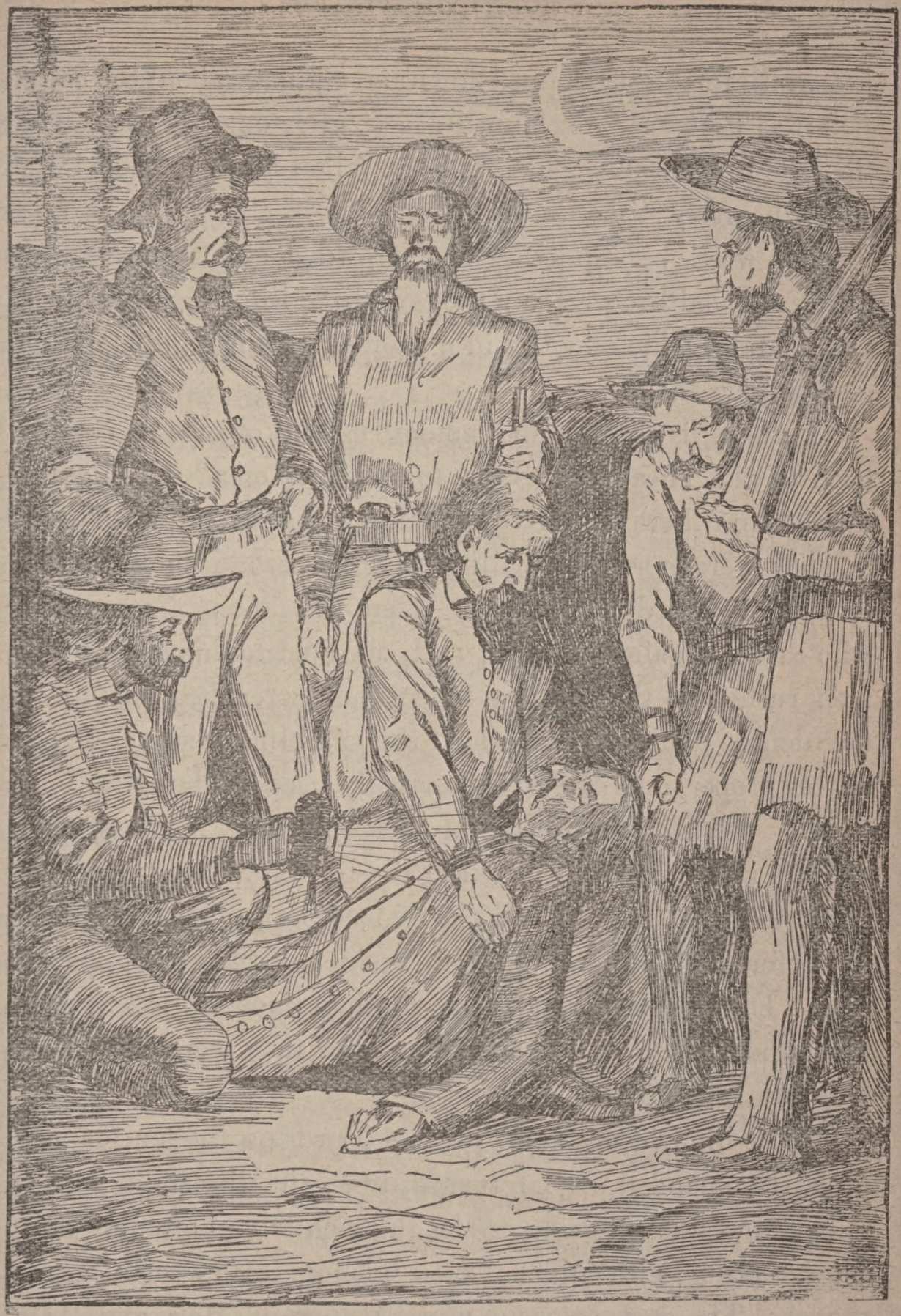
"Murder!" "*Killed!*" "DUKE SELWYN!"

"Look here, Piper," said Mack, his brow darkening, "none of your nigger tricks on that subject. *I* saw Duke twenty minutes ago."

"Well, *I* saw a man lying in one of the new cellars down there fifteen seconds ago, and Mountain Mag says it's Duke Selwyn. You'd better come along, some of you—Mag's out there with the body, alone."

His manner expressed his sincerity, and a hush fell upon them. Glasses went down, and some one in the inner room passed on the word that Duke Selwyn had met with foul play. In a moment the gaming tables were deserted, the glasses and bottles stood untouched upon the bar, and a band of men, with Mack marching grimly at their head, was hurrying towards the common, lighted by half a dozen lanterns.

Mountain Mag lifted her bull's-eye high as they approached, but she did not speak, nor move from her place at the edge of the cellar. And very quietly, one after another, the men,



"It *is* Selwyn!" exclaimed Mack. "Shot in the back!"—Page 20

Mack still foremost, dropped down and gathered about the body.

"It *is* Selwyn!" exclaimed Mack, after one glance. And then he bent nearer and lifted the fallen head. "Shot!" he added hoarsely; "*shot in the back!*"

They were very quiet as they crowded about him, almost filling the half-dug cellar; they were waiting to hear Mack speak again, which he did in a moment, rising and standing erect among them.

"Fellows, is there a man among us that objects to coming back to the Theatre as escort to this dead man? I'm going to take him there, and I've something to say to you all."

They were more than willing to go back, and they signified as much by word and action. There was no one among them who cared to gainsay Mack; and, obedient to his orders, two men rushed to the Theatre, where they wrenched off one of the double doors that separated the gambling room from the saloon proper, and carried it hurriedly back to the cellar.

They were a rough body of men—profane, reckless, some of them more than half intoxicated—but they were very silent and orderly as they moved slowly back to the Theatre, walking before, behind, and on either side of the extemporized bier. Every man among them who had known Duke Selwyn had either feared or respected him, and they were now filled with awe and startled expectation.

"Take him through and put the boards on the long table," Mack commanded, as he turned, upon the threshold of the saloon, and moved aside to let the men who bore the body enter, noting with quick, keen glances every man as he passed. The last to come were Mountain Mag and Billy Piper, side by side.

"I'm glad you're with us, Mag; you're worth all these

fellows," said Mack, his voice relaxing its sharp tone as he addressed her. Then advancing toward the inner room he called: "Don't touch him, men; leave him just as he lies; it's a bullet in the back of the neck that did for him. *He's* past help, but *we've* got something to do before we die."

Mountain Mag, standing white-faced and seemingly dazed in the doorway, made a sudden movement, and Billy Piper touched her upon the arm.

"Give me the glim, Mag," he whispered, "and I'll go look after Nick. You'd better take a drop at the bar."

Scarcely heeding him, Mag let him take the lantern from her hand. Her eyes were fixed upon the men about the long table; she was straining her ears to catch every word, but she did not leave her place near the entrance.

For some moments the men stood close about the table, looking down upon the dead, those in the outer circle lifting themselves on tiptoe, peering under arms, pressing against the foremost ones, in their efforts to see the still face, and long, moveless figure.

It was a fine figure as it lay there; contrasting strangely with many of those active ones around it—tall, lithe, muscular, clad in garments of fashionable cut and faultless taste. He wore a long, loose outer coat of some fine, light material, but the head was bare. The face was that of a man of thirty, he might even be a little older; no one in Caledonia was sufficiently familiar with Duke Selwyn to know his age. It was an aristocratic face, a refined face, a strong face, but not strictly correct in its outline. He had often been called a fine-looking man, seldom a handsome one. Perfect regularity of feature rarely accompanies a nature so strong, original, and self-poised as had been that of Duke Selwyn.

A mass of fine, fair hair was brushed lightly back from a forehead high, broad and white; eyes that had been keenly blue were dimly seen through half closed lids; the nose was large, slightly Roman, and as clear cut as a cameo; the mouth was thin-lipped and fine; the chin firm to obstinacy. The large, white hands betokened the strength of the man; the broad, high brow told of courage and intelligence. An hour ago, he stood in the throng that had gathered to admire and applaud the beauty of Aileen Lorne, the star of the Theatre, a man among men, himself almost as popular, as much the target of admiring glances as she. Half an hour later, he had emerged from the *Cafe*,—another attachment of Mack's wonderful Theatre—with the queen of the evening upon his arm, and had exchanged a word and a jest with Mack himself as he passed on with his fair companion, and now—.

"Boys," said Mack, taking off his hat, and almost to a man the others followed his example; "boys, listen to me! Half an hour ago I saw Duke Selwyn alive and hearty. He passed me with Miss Lorne. They had been taking supper in the restaurant there, and he was escorting her home. He had to go from this door," pointing to the chief entrance, "past the new block and across the common to the boarding-house—a bee line almost, and a distance of say sixty rod. And between this door and the door of the boarding-house, he was shot down by some fiend, some coward—shot in the back! Every man that was here when Billy Piper came in with the news is here now, and I'm glad to see it. Do you know *why* I ask you to stay?"

They were all silent for a moment, seemingly puzzled by this unexpected question. Then a red-shirted fellow spoke.

"I'm blamed if we do, Mack. Is it Regulators you want?"

"You've said it, Blowey. Listen: When Selwyn passed me at the door of the restaurant, I came straight into the saloon and took a look at things. You know I make it my business to notice who is in my place at all times."

"I should remark," interpolated some one who evidently had good reason for confirming Mack's statement. "Ye're shoutin' now, Mack."

"Well, I'm not done shouting; so don't interrupt me. I was saying that you were all here, at the table or around the bar; you were here when Duke Selwyn went past my door alive; you have been here every moment since, until we all went out together. Consequently, wherever else suspicion may fall, it cannot fall upon one of you—of us. And so *we* are the men, above all others, to join hands and try to hit upon the one who did it."

There was a murmur among his auditors, and through it he heard some one say:

"Who was he, any how?"

"Who's that?" asked Mack, sharply.

There was a little stir at the opposite end of the table, and then the men fell back, and a roughly-dressed, bearded fellow stood out from among them.

"I'm the feller that piped," he said, giving a careless hitch to a belt from which two long pistols protruded. "I've just struck the settlement, and am askin' fur infurmation."

"Well, I'll give it to you. I see some others here that may not have known Duke Selwyn and perhaps none of you knew him as well as I did. Duke Selwyn was a square man; he never went back on his friends, nor turned a shoulder to his enemies. He was a gentleman, and spent his money like one. His pockets were never empty, and he always had a dollar for

a friend. He wasn't so tough and rough as some of us; he passed half of his time in the States, and he always brought back with him a bit of the breath of God's country. He was a heavy owner in the mining lands, and you may bet that no man in his employ ever got left or grumbled. He was square with everybody; he played fair, he drank fair. I didn't think he had an enemy in the country. You'll see more men swarming here before sundown to-morrow, eager to lend a hand and hunt down his murderer, than would ever turn out if all of *us* went under. But, just the same, there's some one, not a mile away this minute, who put that bullet in his back."

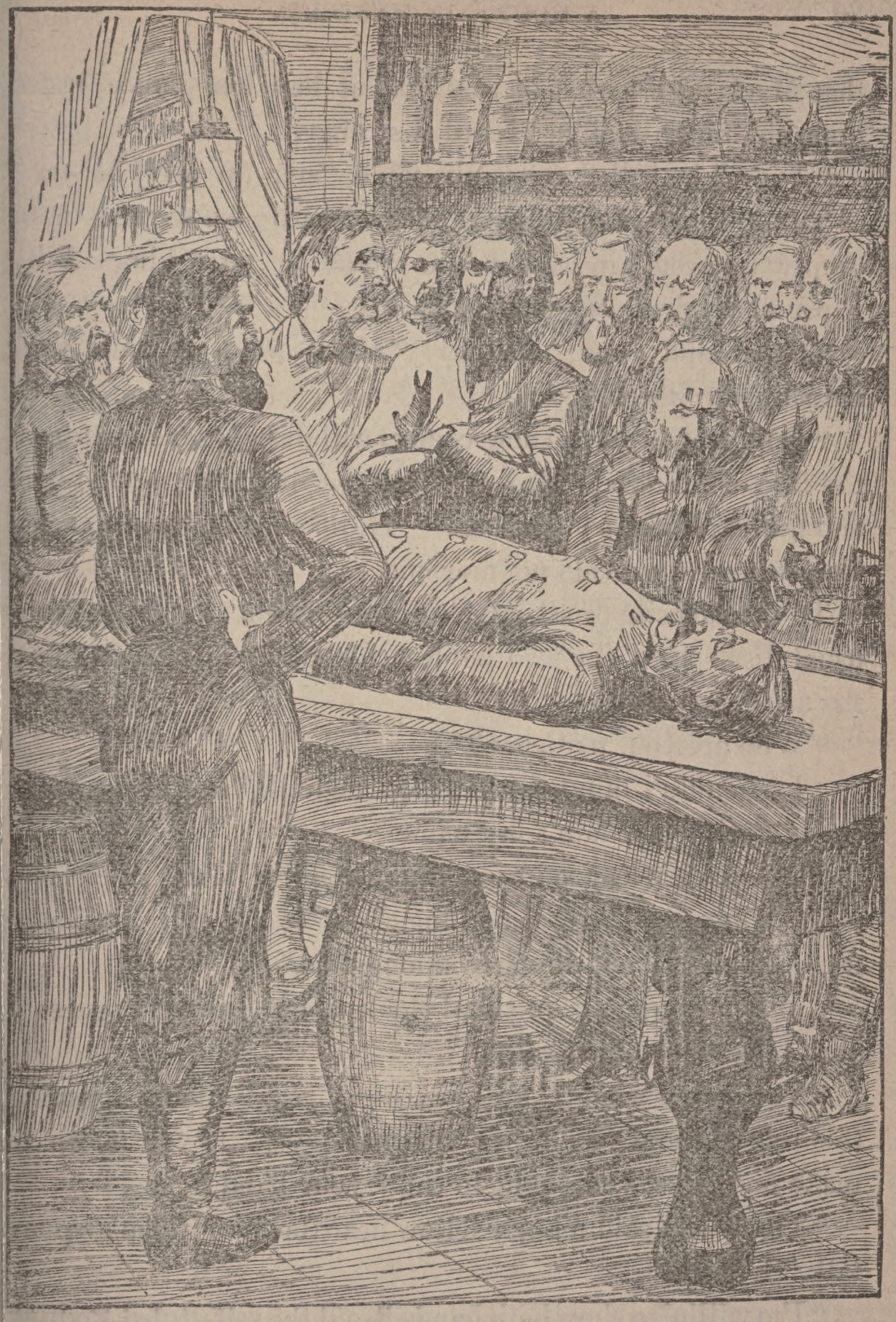
It was a long speech for Mack, for he was a man of deeds rather than of words, and it seemed to have made an impression.

Mountain Mag had advanced, and she now stood midway between Billy Piper and the stranger who had asked for information, the latter having drawn back a little from the circle about the table.

"Now, men," pursued Mack, "I want to know how you stand. If there's one among you that ain't willing to hunt down this assassin, in the best way he can, with money, or time, or brains, I want him to walk out o' that door quick, and he needn't come back; I shan't want his patronage. Duke Selwyn was my friend; he's laid down many a dollar on this very table, and he's carried as many more away from it. I'm going to see justice done him, and I want my friends to stand by me."

"We will, Mack! We will," they said; "Count us in—call the roll—organize—show us a trail; we'll pull the rope!"

Mack's eyes were traveling swiftly from face to face. No man made a movement to leave the place, although each knew



"I'm the feller that piped!"—Page 23.

that Mack meant what he said, and at last his glance rested upon the rough-looking, bearded stranger.

"I say," he called across the table, "step up here, Mister."

The stranger gave no sign that he heard; he seemed to be deeply interested in the woman standing near him. Billy Piper touched him upon the arm.

"Go around there," he said. "Mack wants to take your measure, stranger."

"Does he?" said the new-comer, withdrawing his eyes from the face of Mountain Mag. "Well, let him slide around here and take it; I've no objections." He spoke with good-natured fearlessness, and made no movement.

To the surprise of all, Mack did not resent this rather unusual disrespect. Instead he left his place and approached the stranger.

"Who are you, pardener?" he asked.

"I shouldn't mind being called Podunk," said the stranger coolly, "although tain't my name."

"One name's as good as another," replied Mack graciously. "The point is to know something about *what* you are. You're the only out an' out stranger amongst us."

"Wal," casting a quizzical look about him, "I guess I ain't none the worse for that."

"You heard what I said just now," said Mack, ignoring this retort, "and you didn't make a move. If you mean to make one of us, you ought to show your hand."

"That's so," said a burly fellow near them. "That's square talk."

"I'm willin' to show both hands," said the self-styled Podunk composedly, "only it strikes me as you're wastin' time. Ye kin call me Podunk and imagine I'm purty near sech a fel-

ler as the rest of ye—I guess I'm purty square—and for the rest, ye'll have plenty of time to find out, fer I've looked things over here and I've concluded to stay. There's one thing I may as well tell ye, though, fer ye'll find it out the first row that comes up: I can't bear to fight, and I'm a constitooshunal coward. But I'm some on pollyticks, diploomaticks, an' lawin'. I'm full of ability in them directions, an' my judgment tells me ye'd better get down to business. That dead feller there ain't goin' to git up an' tell who killed him, an' I'd try some kind o' trick purty soon as 'ud lead to sumthin', if I was running this ere. *I'd* begin to investergate, I would."

The fellow's harangue had tickled the fancy of the rough men about him, and they now greeted it with characteristic signs of approval.

"Bully for Podunk!" "Give us your flipper!" "Come out and take somethin'," came from one and another. But Podunk drew himself up with much dignity.

"This yer gentleman's the boss here, my friends," he said, bowing toward Mack. "Let him perceed. We kin drink an' scrape acquaintance later. The point now's to organize, an' find out how this thing begun. *I* sh'd say—but of course I'm only suggestin',—send for the Coroner, perviden he's got any head on him."

The wisdom of Podunk's suggestion was evident. Caledonia was declared to possess a Coroner with a head, and a very good one, on him, and a messenger was sent to rouse him. Meanwhile the crowd gathered about the bar in the outer room, and listened to Billy Piper's story of the discovery of the dead or dying man.

When it was told there was a buzz of comment, and then the voice of Podunk was heard addressing Mack.

"It 'pears to me," he said, "that the next thing to do is to send for his nighest friends, if he's got any, and see what *they've* got ter say. May'be it'ill turn out that he had some secret enemy."

"Phil Dalton's the one to go for," said one of the men.

"You're right, Joe," cried Mack. "Billy, go to the St. Charles and rout up Dalton."

As Billy Piper turned to comply with this request, he paused beside Mountain Mag, who had seated herself a little aloof from the men.

"I left your horse at the side door," he said, and as she nodded, he passed on and out of the saloon.

"Mag," said Mack, beckoning her forward, "Billy says you went into the cellar first. Was he quite dead?"

Mag nodded, but did not rise. "He was quite dead," she said calmly. "He had just breathed his last."

"You were passing, Billy says,—did you see or hear anything?"

"Not a sound. As for seeing, even my lantern could scarcely show me the road. I've waited to learn what you were going to do, Mack. I s'pose you'll want me when the Coroner begins?"

"Of course."

"Well, that can't be until morning; so I guess I'll get Nick off the street. I was riding the town looking for—"

"Cool Hank?" suggested Mack, with a knowing smile.

"No; I wanted Monckton. He's been away from the ranch for three days."

"Well, you don't think of riding out to the ranch now, I hope, Mag?"

"Oh, no! I'll stable Nick, and stay in town as long as I'm

wanted. I wish you'd fix me some brandy and water Mack. I feel very queer."

"Yes, indeed," said Mack, "and no wonder; such a shock as this!"

CHAPTER III.

MOUNTAIN MAG.

Mountain Mag was a familiar figure to the *habitues* of "Mack's," but she was an object of interest, and some curiosity, to the stranger who had chosen to be called Podunk. And small marvel, for Mag was by no means the typical frontier female. She was a character among the Caledonians, and well she deserved her prestige.

Mag was a tall, finely formed, muscular young woman, with firm, handsome features, much sunburned; fearless, flashing black eyes; and tawny hair, that was drawn to the top of her head and coiled there underneath a Spanish sombrero. She was dressed in some coarse blue stuff, with loosely fitting waist, and a skirt that hung in heavy folds, terminating at the tops of the cavalry boots which covered a pair of shapely feet.

Such was Mountain Mag as she stood at Mack's bar, drinking her brandy and water, apparently unconscious that she was an uncommon figure. Whatever else she may have been, let our story develop.

As she lowered the glass from her lips and was about to turn from the bar, a small door at the side of the room opened, and a little sleepy old man came toward her. His scant grey locks

were in disorder, and he looked as if he had just tumbled into his clothes. In fact, he seemed to be still hitching himself into them as he advanced. At sight of Mag, his dull eyes brightened, and without seeming to notice the others, he came slowly toward her, rubbing his hands.

"Oh, Mag!" he said eagerly, "it's good luck to see *you* standing there. You're not often seen nowadays. How do, Mag; how do?"

Mountain Mag took the dirty hand which he extended and shook it cordially.

"How are you, Pop?" she said; "you look hearty. Have something?"

The old man signified his willingness, and drained off a glass of brandy in a trice.

"Fill it again, Mack," said Mag authoritively. "Pop can't afford to lose his sleep without a stimulant. Here." And she threw a piece of money down before the proprietor.

But Mack pushed it toward her with a quick hand.

"Drinks are free to-night, Mag; put it up," he said.

For answer Mag pushed the coin towards the old man.

"Put it in your pocket, Pop," she said. "Drinks may not be free after sun up."

Mack laughed at this sally, and filled the old man a second glass.

"Come, gentlemen," he said, "here's brandy for all, free as water. Let's drink confusion and speedy death to Duke Selwyn's murderer."

They all crowded about the bar, Podunk foremost, to respond to the invitation.

"Hold on!" cried one of the men; "Mag mustn't be out

of this toast. Here, Mag." He turned with a brimming draught in his hand.

But while they were filling their glasses the Mountain Maid had disappeared.

After drinking their sombre toast, the men gradually drew apart, dividing into little groups by mutual consent and natural selection. Mack was silent and seemed trying to arrange some plan, or put into shape some set of ideas, for he jotted down a few lines in a dirty memorandum book from time to time, and scratched his head thoughtfully between notes.

At first the man Podunk made one of a group of excited talkers who gathered about the stove, but after a time it came about, without seeming intent, that he and the old man called Pop found themselves seated side by side upon a short bench near one of the windows, and some distance from the rest.

Podunk had lighted a short ugly pipe, and he now proffered his companion a black and strong cigar. Pop was mellowed by Mag's generous potions of brandy, the cigar served to make him still more comfortable, and for some moments they talked upon the all-absorbing topic. Podunk related graphically the facts concerning the finding of the murdered man; then he asked carelessly:

"Who's that rum gal who seemed sich a friend o' yourn,—that Mag?"

The old man removed his cigar from his mouth and lowered his voice.

"You're right in calling Mag my friend," he said gravely. "I think she *is* my friend—my only friend in this cursed place. Who is she? You must be a stranger here not to know."

"So I be," promptly replied Podunk, "but I am willin' to get acquainted."

The old man replaced his cigar and took two or three long puffs. When he removed it and spoke again, he seemed to have fallen into a retrospective mood.

"I've been a year and a half in this hole," he said slowly; "a year and a half. Caledonia may be a good place for miners, speculators, and gamblers, but it's a hard town on a broken down old actor like me. I wasn't always a Variety hanger-on, let me tell you, Mister. I was a legitimate comedian once, and not so long ago, either. I drew a good salary, drank good wine, and smoked good cigars. But I struck bad luck, and I tell you it had to press me pretty hard before it brought me here."

"Company busted?" queried his listener.

"No, sir. That couldn't have done it; there's always a place for a good actor who attends to his business. No, sir; it was drink; drink and cards—they've ruined many a better man than me."

"I shouldn't wonder if yer was right," admitted Podunk in a tone that caused the old man to turn and scrutinize him sharply. But the genius was looking absently at the toe of his boot; and the old man, glad to have found a listener who did not seem anxious to run away from him, went on.

"Mack's a hard one on his people, especially on them that he can manage to do without, and I don't have none o' the best of times. He runs the boarding-house down yonder, and sends all hands there to pay half their earnings to his old woman. I tried it when I was fresh here—I had quite a run for a week or so. But the old man's down on his luck; I'm only Old Utility now. I sleep on a bunk in the lumber-room,

and I eat anything that aint wanted in the restaurant yonder. I'm nothing any more only poor old Pop, broken down comedian."

He sighed and let his chin fall into his hands, a very picture of dejection.

"Have something to drink?" suggested Podunk.

The old man made a gesture of assent, and showed signs of returning animation. They drank together at the bar, and then Podunk led his companion back to their place by the window.

"Chirk up, Pop" he said hopefully; "maybe ye'll find me as good a friend as yer Mountain gal."

The liquor had already served to cheer the old man, and he replied with animation.

"Oh, Mag! There's a girl for ye."

"Spin a yarn about her, can't ye?" Podunk said insinuatingly. "I'm kind o' curus an' interested in the gal."

Pop's eyes lighted up.

"I can't say anything but good of Mag," he said. "And anybody else might tell ye as much about her as I can—any old Caledonian, I mean. Mag's a native of these parts. She was born among the mountains out yonder, and is more at home with her weapons, and in the saddle, than half these fellows here, for she grew up to the life, while they, most of them, are Eastern born, and didn't have her early training. Mag's father, Michael Drood his name was, was a pioneer California digger. His wife ran away from him when that girl was only a year old. A bad lot Mag's mother was."

"I should say!"

"Drood was a rough, uneducated fellow, with no notion of a woman's needs; but he had a heart, and he nursed Mag

right through her babyhood, and did his best by her according to his ideas of duty. He carried her with him into his mine, on his journeys. Whether he hunted, fished, or fought, Mag was there. As she grew up, he taught her to ride, to shoot, to hunt, to swim. I suppose he ceased to realize that she was not a boy. Few Western boys get such a hardy training. Well, old Drood was killed by an explosion nearly two years ago. He left quite a fortune in mining property, a cattle ranch, and cash. But Mag sticks to the old life. She don't know any other, and she can manage her ranch as well as the best ranchman in the country."

"Well, I swan!" ejaculated Podunk. "She'd be a bonanza to some man who wanted a wife an' a ranch, now wouldn't she?"

"I guess there's only one man would stand much of a show with Mag," said Pop, lowering his voice; "and he—"

He stopped suddenly, for there was a general stir in the saloon, and Billy Piper, breathless and agitated, was standing before the bar.

"Dalton can't be found," he said.

"What!" cried a chorus of voices.

"Dalton is not at the St. Charles—his room is empty—his bed hasn't been slept in at all!"

Mack came swiftly out from behind the bar, and clutching the messenger by the shoulder swung him half around.

"Do you mean to say," he thundered, "that Mr. Philip Dalton is *missing?*"

"That's the size of it," replied Billy coolly.

For a moment not a man, among the twenty or more who had gathered around him, spoke. Then Mack withdrew his hand, and beckoned to a tall, dark man who stood a little aloof

from the rest. The man advanced, and Mack led him through the open door into the gambling room, where the body of Duke Selwyn lay.

"Who's that black feller, Pop?" whispered Podunk.

"Hist," cautioned the old man; "that's Doe Connolley." And then he put a dirty hand to his mouth, and whispered from behind it:—"*Captain of the Regulators.*"

CHAPTER IV

STRANGE PROCEEDINGS.

When Mountain Mag left the saloon, she went swiftly around the big, low building that served so many ends, and hastily untied the halter by which Billy Piper had secured her horse.

"Softly, Nick," she whispered, as the animal gave signs of restlessness. "Softly; you'll soon have your breakfast now."

She patted his glossy coat, and then drew the bridle across her arm. The handsome and well trained animal rubbed his nose against her shoulder, and walked beside her into the street. She paused for a moment to listen to any sound that might indicate an observer near, and then, hearing nothing, took her way past the Theatre, and in the direction of the new buildings midway between Mack's and the scene of the murder.

It was within an hour of daylight, yet the glimmering rays that found their way to the street, gave evidence that there

was life within the walls. Mag led her horse forward until she was opposite a dark stairway, that seemed to divide the barn-like structure, and then tossing the bridle across his neck she said:

"Steady now, Nick; steady."

The stairway was dark, and narrow, and steep, but she mounted it without hesitation, and knocked at a heavy door at the top.

Presently a small, upper panel of the door swung open, and a rough face peered out.

"What's wanted?" demanded the owner of the face sharply. And then, as Mag came close to the door, she heard a supplementary, "Well, I swan!"

"Is Monckton here, Joe?" she asked quietly.

The head in the opening turned to the right and left, and seemed to consider.

"Do you want him?" he asked.

"Of course. That is, I want to speak with him. I'm in a hurry too, Joe."

"All right!" The head disappeared, and the panel shut with a click.

Mag leaned against the wall, drew a long sigh, and waited, In a moment the door opened, almost noiselessly, and a tall, broad-shouldered, swarthy man came out.

"Mag," he said eagerly, "what is it? Do you want me?"

There was something almost wistful in his voice, but the girl did not heed it.

"If I wanted you within the past two days, Monk, I might have remained in want. You have overstayed your time with a vengeance. Yes, I want you to do something for me—to give me an hour of your time. Then you may come back and

lose the rest of your wages, if you are not already broke."

The man flushed and bit his under lip, but he did not speak and after a moment of silence Mag asked:

"Is Hank in there?"

"No." The answer was almost sullen. "So it's Cool Hank you're anxious about, is it?"

"Yes, it's Hank. Has he been here to-night?"

"Not as I know of."

"How long have you been here?"

"All night, nearly."

"Monk,"—Mag laid a hand upon his arm, and lowered her voice as she drew close to him—"I want you to go the rounds and find out where Hank is, if he is anywhere in town. Do you understand me? *I wish to know where he has passed the night.*"

"Do you want to see him?"

"No. And you must not tell him that I am in town, or that I sent you. I will be here at the foot of the stairs in half an hour. Can you go the rounds so soon?"

"Yes."

"And will you?"

"Will I? You know I will."

"Don't lose a moment, then." She moved toward the head of the stairway. "In half an hour, Monk."

"Mag,"—the man followed her and began to descend the stairs at her side—"somethin's gone wrong; what is it?"

The girl did not speak until they had reached the street and she stood again beside the horse.

"I'm not so sure of *that*," she said, as she swung herself into the saddle, "but—somebody has killed—Duke Selwyn."

"By Heaven!"—He checked himself, for there was no one to

hear him. With the last word still upon her lips, Mountain Mag had shaken her rein and dashed away.

"Well, I declare!" ejaculated Monckton, as he turned his face toward Mack's, "if that girl ain't too queer for comfort!"

Meantime, Mountain Mag guided her galloping horse in and out among the short, irregular street, an if anxious to elude any possible follower, and finally emerged by the way of a narrow alley, upon the outskirts of the town, with all its dingy habitations at her back and a broad sweep of prairie before her. Here she checked her horse to look and listen.

Satisfied with the stillness around her, she next took from the horn of her saddle, her dark lantern, and pushing up the slide, bent down, and by the light which it shed surveyed the ground at her feet.

A narrow trail or footpath led from the alley across the prairie toward the southwest. She reined her horse into this, shut the lantern with a click, and uttered a low chirrup which sent the animal in a swift gallop along the trail.

For more than a mile Mag kept her horse speeding onward; then she checked him, and, aided by her lantern, again looked about her. A glimmer of water to the right reflected the lantern's ray, and as if she had found what she sought, the girl slipped from the saddle.

"Steady Nick," she said, and the horse stood montionless, while with the lantern shedding its rays before her she advanced toward the body of water, less than four rods from the trail. It was only a sink-hole, not sixty yards in circumference, and bounded on all sides by a broad margin of black mud.

Mag set the lantern down at her feet, taking care to avoid the mud, and thrusting her hand into her bosom, drew out the handkerchief containing the watch and jewels she had taken from the body of Duke Selwyn. She tightened the knots, weighed the bundle in her hand, and lifting her arm deliberately, as if aiming at some definite spot, threw the handkerchief out into the pool. It fell with a dull splash. The girl uttered a sigh of relief, and returned to her horse, which she mounted and headed townward.

Back over the trail she urged him, again at a swift gallop but she did not re-enter the narrow alley. Instead, upon reaching the edge of the town, she made a wide *detour*, walking her horse slowly, and coming into town at last upon the side opposite the mouth of the alley, and through the street which ran between Mack's boarding-house and the scene of the last tragedy.

All about her the atmosphere was changing from black to grey; daylight was fast approaching.

At the boarding-house, Mag turned her horse's head and walked him past the cellars, and on to the place where she had lately parted from the man Monckton. He was there before her, and came out from the dark stairway and laid a hand upon her horse's neck.

"Well, Monk?"

"I didn't find him, Mag. He ain't been in any of the all-night places."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I could be by asking. I don't believe Hank's been seen in town since yesterday mornin'."

Mag sighed and dropped from her saddle.

"Monk," she said, "I wish you'd take Nick and see that

he has breakfast and a rub down; a good one, mind. When you leave him, go to Mack's and see what's going on.

"I've been already."

"Well?"

"The Coroner's there, and a bit of excitement was brewin' when I came out."

"How?"

"Why, it seems there was a stranger amongst the boys, and they had all agreed to stop till the Coroner came."

"Yes, yes!"

"Well, this feller had been gassin' with old Pop, and they was standin' at the bar drinkin' together when the Coroner come. When they kind o' straightened out, and Mack went to call the roll, Mr. Koplunk—"

"Podunk."

"Podunk, then, was missin', and of course Mack was mad."

"Of course. Well, Monk, tell Mack that I've gone to get a little sleep, and that he needn't look for me till the regular business of the inquest begins. I won't come until then."

"All right, Mag; I'll see that they don't bother ye. I'll come for you myself. Jog along, Nick."

He led the horse away, and Mag stood where he had left her until horse and man had passed out of sight around the nearest corner. She had taken the dark lantern from the saddle-bow, and still held it in her hand.

It was the quietest hour of the twenty-four in that unquiet town, where nobody rose early. All who had not retired during the hours of darkness were now doing so, and such as had not yet sought their morning couch were lounging sleepily in the most comfortable place at their command. The grey morning fog was slowly brightening, but Mag knew it was

the hour of all others in which one might pace the streets of the entire town unnoticed and unchallenged.

She turned therefore, with the lantern in her hand, and walked swiftly toward the cellars.

As she moved away from the stairway a shadowy figure appeared at the entrance, and looked out after her. As she disappeared in the grey fog, the watcher chuckled softly, and stealthily followed.

The girl walked straight to the cellar's edge, passed between the two mounds nearest the boarding house, as she had done when stopped by Billy Piper, and, as on the former occasion, flashed the light of the lantern before her as she went.

Again she dropped into the cellar, and approached the spot where the body of Duke Selwyn had lain. Holding the lantern close to the ground, and bending low to scan the space it illuminated, she walked slowly about the small cellar. Twice she paced around it, walking in a circle, and turning the eye of the lantern from side to side. Then she stopped, and stood in the center of her circle, as if to consider something.

A voice close at hand startled her.

"Ye've jest missed it," the voice said, "but ye come mighty close. Jest give me the illumynâtor."

Before she could recover from her surprise the lantern was caught out of her hand, and held aloft so that it lighted both their faces, and Mag saw the grinning visage of the man Podunk.

"I'll be hanged if ye ain't smarter than that hull gang o' Mack's," the man said. "Ye see, great minds flow in the same channels; that is they does ef ye was lookin' fer *this*."

He made a stride forward, and turned the bull's-eye upon an object half buried in the soft sand. Mag involuntarily

followed his movement with her eyes, and then sprang toward the object, which had at first escaped her notice. But Podunk was before her.

"I reckon that's the thing as did the business," he said, holding out for her inspection a small pistol, ivory handled, silver mounted, and of unique workmanship. "That ought ter help out jestice, oughtn't it ? Jest look at the jimcrack!"

He rubbed the muddy weapon vigorously against a leg of his trousers, and again held it out to Mag, at the same time letting the light of the bull's-eye play across her face.

The girl took the weapon, looked at it keenly, and her face, relaxing a little, seemed less startled and eager.

"'Tain't jest what ye expected ter see, is it?" Podunk said cheerfully. "I swan, *I'm* flustered. I'd like to hear what that gang at Mack's 'll say when they feast their eyes on *that*."

Mag threw back her head, and suddenly found her tongue.

"How long have you been following me?" she asked sharply.

"Ain't been follerin' ye. What do ye take me fur? I got tired o' the society at Mack's, so when the Coroner came I jest slipped out, an' thought I'd do a little prospectin' on my own account. 'Pears *you* was took with the same notion!"

Mag dropped her eyes, and turned the pistol slowly over in her hand.

"Yes," she said, "I remembered we were a little careless when the body was removed. No one thought of looking for traces of the murderer. What do you mean to do with this?"

"Wall, I guess we was jint discoverers. What would you say?"

Mag looked up quickly.

"Ye've jest missed it, but ye come mighty close!"—Page 41.

"Do you want to take this back to Mack's?" she asked.

"I ain't particular about it."

"If you want them to have it, you'd better take it; I shan't. You can tell them that we met here, if you like."

"There ain't any reason why I sh'd tell *anything* you don't want told, young woman. I'm a disinterested party, and as much your friend as anybody's."

The girl hesitated a moment and then asked;

"Do you mean that you'll hold your tongue about my being here, if I ask you to?"

"I'll hold my clapper, ef I promise to, now you bet."

"I'm going to try you, just to see what you're made of. I don't want Mack, nor any one, to know I came back here. Will you keep it mum?"

"Now, you're talkin' square! I'll keep it mum, sure enough."

"Even from the Coroner?"

Podunk laughed softly.

"You jest watch me; I'll fix the Coroner." He put out his hand and touched the pistol. "Jest give me that a minit."

Mag released her hold upon the weapon, and Podunk tossed it back upon the ground in the place where it had laid the moment before.

"Thar," he said, "that's comfortable. The Coroner and his band'll be here before many minits; they're just waitin' for the peep o'day. They'll find it thar, I reckon. Taint likely any one else'll git here first. You kin go your way, Miss, an' I'll go mine. We'll meet at the inquest, an' if I kin do anything more fur ye, jest call on Podunk. Now, let's get out o' this, and make ourselves scarce."

He led the way toward the outlet, and Mag followed him.

"Podunk," she said, when they were out of the cellar, "I'm obliged to you. Mountain Mag remembers favors, and repays them when she can."

"Hist!" said Podunk; "no more talkin'. Good bye, gal. Don't be uneasy."

He motioned her to go to the left, while he turned and disappeared behind one of the mounds in the opposite direction. Mag stood looking after him, and it seemed as if she were about to follow, but some second thought prevailed. She hurried away from the mounds, and went by the shortest route to the St. Charles.

For a few moments all was silent in and about the cellars. Then the form of Podunk came stealthily back by the way it had gone, and stole forward until it stood at the spot Mag had quitted.

"She won't come back, then," he muttered. "So much the better for her."

He did not descend into the cellar, but moved stealthily to and fro among the mounds, like an Indian scout who scents danger; watching by turns the road taken by Mag, and the path leading to Mack's. Daylight was almost upon him when he dropped into the cellar and began a series of hurried manœuvres which changed him into another individual.

He pulled off the old slouch hat which had adorned his shaggy head, and with it came a wig, that left him with short, close-cropped, brown hair. Next the bushy whiskers were removed, and hat, wig and whiskers were stowed into capacious pockets with which his bagging garments seemed lined. Then in a trice he took from within his loose blue shirt a flat parcel, which, upon being shaken out, proved to be a long, thin, soft rubber coat. This he pulled on over his rough garments,

and buttoned close about his throat. It fell almost to his heels, and covered him completely. This done he fitted on a silken skull cap, and the metamorphose was complete.

He clambered out of the cellar again, and looked and listened.

"They're coming," he muttered. "I thought it was time."

Still he watched and waited, until the party of men, with the Coroner at their head, were all abreast of the row of buildings which contained the gambling house. Then he ran around the cellar, passing in the rear of it, and disappeared behind the row, just as the Coroner and his escort came within sight of the cellar from the front.

CHAPTER V.

BARBARA.

The St. Charles was the only hotel of pretensions in Caledonia, and for its "pretensions" the luckless guest paid dearly.

Nevertheless, in the times of which we write, it was always thronged, and there was seldom a day when some applicant did not turn away from its highly varnished counter, and the huge mirror that reflected everything within its range, with the discouraging announcement, and gratuitous advice, ringing in his ear:

"Chuck full. Better try the Astor, or some of the boarding-houses."

But many and motley as were the comers and goers at the St. Charles, it never yet sheltered, for so much as an hour, so fair and stately a presence as that of the young girl who appeared in the dining room, at eight o'clock in the morning—an astonishingly early hour to the Caledonians—and looked her surprise at its emptiness.

She had arrived late on the day before, and secured a room for herself and companion after some difficulty, and at her request the clerk had inscribed upon the register her name, Barbara Wray, and that of her companion, Miss Susan Collins.

A lovely creature was Barbara Wray, a girl just budding into womanhood; low voiced, graceful, high bred; carrying herself with just a touch of haughtiness. Her pale oval face looked a trifle worn and anxious; the firm red lips were closed tightly, as if to keep back some turbulent feeling that was seeking expression; the soft brown eyes, that just matched the hair rippling above a low, broad forehead, looked as if not long since they had been shedding tears.

That Barbara Wray was a lady by birth and breeding, was as evident as that the young woman who entered the long dining room at her side, was not, and could not be. It was evident to the half awakened clerk, who hastened to show her the way, and evident to the head waiter, who flew to conduct her to a table by the cheeriest window. What wonder, then, if each returned to his post inwardly asking himself what had brought this richly-dressed, dainty-mannered girl to Caledonia—a frontier town, a paradise for miners, gamblers, and all manner of adventurers.

The young woman who seated herself opposite Miss Wray, and looked about her with a long slow stare which she took no pains to conceal, might be characterized by the word showy.

She was short, and plump, and decidedly blonde; her small blue eyes were very quick and eager, and her abundant and elaborately dressed hair was of that impossible yellow tinge which is acquired by bleaching locks that are by nature red. She was slowly dressed in some cheap stuff, and every fold and ribbon upon her person seemed adjusted for effect.

"I declare," exclaimed this young woman, when the waiter had bustled away to bully the cook and order an uneatable breakfast; "I declare, if this ain't just too funny. Why, I counted on seeing no end of gold diggers and what not at their breakfasts. Have they eaten and gone, do you suppose? or ain't they up yet!"

"They are not up," answered her companion, "if one may judge from appearances. I think we have risen at an unfashionably early hour."

"Well, I don't wonder," said Miss Susan, "such trampings up and down as I heard all night long. Some of the people must be just about going to sleep now. *I* couldn't sleep; I am too anxious to see things."

Miss Wray made no reply. She did not seem to note what her companion was saying.

"I think," she said, "that it will not be wrong to ask the gentleman who was introduced by Mr. Follingsbee, to breakfast with us. I—I—am so anxious to know what can be done—" She broke off abruptly and beckoned to a waiter who had just entered the room, tying on his apron as he came.

"Will you say to the clerk that I shall be glad if he will send to the room of Mr.——— the gentleman who came with us in the stage yesterday, and ask if he will please join us at breakfast, or, if he is not up, speak with us at his convenience in the parlor."

The negro grinned, and bowed, and went to deliver the message.

"Upon my word," broke out Miss Susan, when the man was gone, "if that ain't real funny! You don't know his name, do you? nor I, either. Wasn't it in the letter?"

"Mr. Follingsbee's letter was most hastily written. I presume he did not notice the oversight, or thought the gentleman would make his name known."

"I don't suppose it ever struck *him*. He seemed kind of slow and pokey, anyway. Are you going out this morning, Miss Wray?"

"I hardly know:I have formed no plans. In fact I don't know what to do."

"I think it is mighty strange the way we are fixed. Where do you suppose your father can have gone?"

"Miss Collins"—the girl's voice was a trifle unsteady—"I beg you not to broach that subject. I am full of forebodings, and need all my fortitude. I shall be worse than helpless if I lose my courage."

"Oh, my, Miss Wray, I did'n't mean to hurt you; excuse me," Susan said eagerly. "I am so thoughtless; I dare say it'll all turn out right. Your father may come in on this very morning's stage." You know that splendid looking gentleman said it was probable."

"We will not discuss *him* either, if you please. Ah, here is our breakfast."

Evidently Miss Susan Collins was somewhat overawed by the young lady opposite. She flushed, and a resentful look shone for a moment from her blue eyes, but she lowered them quickly and began to eat and drink without an effort to resume the conversation.

Their silence was broken soon by the clerk, who approached the table with a look of perplexity upon his face.

"The gentleman is not in his room," he said, in a low tone, and the start with which Miss Wray received this announcement did not pass unnoticed. "He is not in the house." Then as the young lady ventured no comment, he asked: "May I trouble you to tell me his name, Miss?"

"His name?" Miss Wray lifted two surprised eyes to his face. "Is it not upon the register?"

"You see, Miss," explained the clerk, "he did not put down his name at first, and after I had registered for you I called his attention to it. He went to the desk, and while he wrote, something called my attention. I put down his room number very hastily, and he was standing at the desk when I turned away. You were the last arrivals, and as I did not look at the register again I have but just found out that there is no name opposite his number."

"No name!"

"No, Miss; only a blur, as if he had purposely drawn a blotter across the fresh ink and so obliterated the letters."

Miss Wray's pale face grew a shade paler. "I am sorry," she said, "but I cannot help you. We met the gentleman upon the train, and he proffered his assistance. If he mentioned his name, I have forgotten it."

"He had an introduc—" began Miss Collins eagerly; but Miss Wray interrupted her by a significant glance.

"He remarked, I think, that he had business here of a commercial nature. Probably he will return soon," she said. "Will you tell me when the coach from the mountains is due?"

"It's due now, Miss. But there's no depending on the

Rockville coaches. What with the bad roads, and the stage robbers, they're uncertain things."

"Are the coaches robbed often, then?" asked Miss Wray anxiously.

"Pretty often of late. They are unsafe things to travel by."

"But there is no other way of reaching Rockville, is there?"

"None so near, and none more safe. But you, surely, are not going on to Rockville, Miss? Caledonia is bad enough, but it's Paradise compared to the mountains. Since the mines have been pushed westward, we've got rid of *some* of our scum, but it's all up there. Drinking and fighting is their steady business, and it's a dull day when there isn't a man killed. Murders don't happen here *every* day, for we've got a plucky band of Regulators looking after things; but we had one last night, the worst—"

"Charlie!" bawled the head waiter, "Connolley wants you in the office."

"Connolley." The talkative clerk started and turned to go, then looking back he said in a low tone over his shoulder, "He's the Chief of the Regulators."

When Barbara Wray rose from an almost untouched breakfast, and went slowly up the long, steep flight of stairs that led to the "Parlor floor", it was with a heavy heart. There was very little stir about the house as yet, so they could hear the hum of voices as they passed the open door of the office, where Charlie and the Chief of the Regulators formed the centre of a small and animated group of men. But there were no loungers about the entrance or in the narrow halls; and while Miss Wray mounted the stairs slowly, her companion walked to the open door and looked out upon the street.

Half way up the stairs Miss Wray became aware, without

lifting her eyes, that some one was standing at the top of the flight, waiting there for her to pass, and she hastened her steps, still without glancing up. As she arrived at the top, a quick exclamation caused her to turn and look at the man who had uttered it. Then she gave a low cry, and put out both her hands.

"Philip Dalton! Oh, how glad I am!"

Philip Dalton, a broad-shouldered, fine-looking man, with a grave face, and quiet dignified bearing, took the two small hands in his own big brown ones, and looked at her without speaking.

"Oh," said Miss Wray again, "I am so glad to see you; so thankful! Oh, Mr. Dalton, have you seen papa? Do you know where he is?"

"Miss Wray! I am greatly surprised! How came you here, of all places in the universe?"

"I came yesterday. I followed papa's instructions, expecting him to meet me here—and—I have not found him."

Philip Dalton glanced about him, and then made a step toward the open door of the parlor just behind them.

"Come into the parlor, Miss Wray," he said. "We can talk there at our ease." He led her across the threshold and closed the door. "I am surprised, I am *sorry* to see you here, alone—"

"I am not alone, Mr. Dalton—not quite. I have a companion such as she is, and I expected to have my father's protection. He was to have met me here."

"Do you mean that your father has been here, in Caledonia, recently, Miss Wray?"

"Papa left home three months ago," the girl said tremulously. "He came here direct. He wrote me very often for

the first two or three weeks, and then came a letter informing me that he was about to set out for Rockville. I did not hear from him again for weeks, and was almost beside myself, when a letter came—a very brief one—in which he said that he was ill in Caledonia, and asked me to come to him, as he could not bear the journey home. I secured a companion and came. I arrived yesterday—and—he is not here."

She checked herself abruptly; there was a look upon Philip Dalton's face that made her heart beat fast with fear. "Oh, she cried, all her composure forsaking her, "tell me what has happened to papa! I cannot bear this suspense!"

He arose and walked across the room, then came slowly back and stood before her.

"Miss Wray," he said gently, "this is no time for evasions. I do not understand your trouble, I don't know how to advise you, but I have been in Caledonia two months, making during the time two trips to Rockville, and neither here or there have I seen or heard of Mr. Wray."

Barbara Wray clasped her hands and rose slowly to her feet. Her eyes were full of horror, her face ghastly.

"Oh," she cried, seeming to address an unseen presence rather than the man before her, "some terrible thing has happened him! All my forebodings have come true! My poor father has met with treachery at the hands of some one! Then suddenly her pallor left her; her face glowed and her brown eyes flashed upon him full of strength and purpose. "Tell me how to act," she said. "Something must be done. I am here in this wretched place alone, it seems; but I will never leave it in this uncertainty. Tell me what to do."

While they stood thus face to face, the door was flung open,

and Susan Collins rushed in, her eyes almost starting from their sockets.

"Miss Wray," she cried, "the awfullest thing has happened! it's just too awful! That handsome man whom you met last night, that Mr. Selwyn, has been murdered!"

She seemed not to have noticed the presence of a third person; but having unburdened herself of her dreadful bit of news, she stopped abruptly and gave Mr. Dalton her full attention.

The effect of her announcement must have been satisfactory to herself. She had certainly produced an effect, and a profound one. All the light and fire went out of Barbara's face, and Philip Dalton glared upon her like a man transfixed by some object of horror.

"Selwyn murdered!" he gasped at last. "Young woman, what do you mean?"

And then, as he slowly turned his head as if to put a question to Barbara Wray, he saw that she had fainted.

CHAPTER VI.

PODUNK REMONSTRATES.

"Quick," he cried, springing to the side of the prostrate girl and lifting her head gently; "call for water, and do what you can for this lady."

Susan came promptly forward, a look half of regret and half of resentment upon her face.

"Miss Wray, the awfullest thing has happened! It's just too awful!"
—Page 54.

"I'll open a window," she said coolly; "that'll revive her." She suited the action to the word, and let in a draft of crisp morning air. "She's coming to already," she said, going back and bending over the fainting girl. "There won't be any need of water, but I guess, if I were you, I'd carry her to the sofa. I reckon she'll be just as comfortable there when she comes to."

In spite of his anxiety, Philip Dalton could not repress a smile; but he acted upon her suggestion, and lifting her slender form in his strong arms, placed it tenderly upon the sofa.

"There," said Susan, who seemed quite equal to the emergency; "now if you'll just stand back, I'll fan her a bit. See; she's beginning to come around."

He moved away from the sofa, and noticing the door open, as Susan, in making her hasty entrance, had left it, went forward to close it. Hearing heavy feet upon the stairs, he looked out.

There was a sharp ejaculation, and then an oath, as the two men who were ascending the stairs caught sight of him, and he lifted his hand with a gesture of warning.

"Hello! Dalton," called a gruff voice. "Blast my eyes if it *ain't* him."

The two men were now at the top of the stairs, and Dalton stepped out upon the landing and closed the door behind him.

"Softly, Connolley," he said; "a lady has fainted in there. Don't alarm her afresh."

"A lady?" exclaimed the clerk, who was just behind Connolley. "Why, it must be the young lady who just came up from breakfast."

"It is," Dalton replied briefly. And then, seeing the eye of the Chief of the Regulators fixed upon him with keen scrutiny, he said; "What is it, Connolley?"

"You're wanted down at Mack's," said Connolley shortly.

"I!" In his momentary concern for Miss Wray, he had forgotten the cause of her sudden illness, and now it flashed back upon his memory. But, still mindful of her, he only added: "What for?"

Connolley's eyes were searching his face, and his look was sombre.

"You'll know soon enough," the Regulator said gloomily. "Where have you been all the morning?"

"In my bed, of course," replied Dalton promptly. "What has happened, Connolley? It must be something important to take me away from my breakfast."

"Bother your breakfast! You've had as much breakfast as I have."

"All right, Captain. Come down stairs and say your say."

Without waiting for a reply Dalton stepped quietly past the two men and went down stairs.

"Confound you, Connolley," muttered Charlie in the ear of the Regulator, "that don't look much like guilt! I don't believe Phil Dalton knows what has happened."

"Save your breath, Tenderfoot," growled Connolley, hurrying after Dalton. "We'll know, blamed soon."

Dalton, without looking back, passed into the office, where several men were now lounging, none of them habitues of the house, but all, as he noted with some inward surprise, with one exception, members of the Regulators. The exception was apparantly the most unconcerned man among them; and the only one who did not manifest tokens of interest, or indignation upon the appearance of Dalton.

"Ef there's anything that I dislike more'n another," he was saying as Dalton appeared in the doorway, "it's havin' one o'

them little guns pinted at me. One time, when I was diggin' in Gallywharf canyon—well, I'll be sizzled!"

One of his listeners, who stood with his face toward the door through which Dalton came, had uttered a sharp sound not unlike the quick, single chirp of a small wood bird, and instantly every eye was withdrawn from Podunk and turned toward the door; seeing which Podunk looked too.

Dalton, who knew the sound to be a signal of the Regulators, stopped and glanced about him; and noting that Connolley was close behind, and the attention of all concentrated upon himself, he waited to give them the first word.

"Hello!" cried the Captain of the Regulators, as his eyes fell upon Podunk, "you've turned up too, have you?"

"I ain't never been lost, as I knows of," retorted Podunk with a grin.

"Oh, you didn't sneak out of Mack's when nobody was lookin', did ye?"

"Not as I knows of. I *walked* out, when I got ready to. Don't know as there is any law agin it."

"Didn't you hear the word passed, that every man was to stay there till the Coroner come?" demanded Connolley.

Podunk scratched his head and seemed making a conscientious effort to remember something.

"'Pears to me I did, come to think of it," he said, as if not quite certain.

"Then why in thunder didn't you stay?" roared Connolley.

"'Cause I thought I'd stayed long enough. If I'd known how much store ye set by me, I might o' tarried. Did ye miss me dreadfully, boss?"

Connolley muttered an oath; and turned his back upon the unconcerned fellow.

"Dalton," he said, with a touch of something like courtesy in his manner, "I 'spose you know what's happened?"

"You are in error, Connolley. What has happened? Something wrong at Mack's, I think you said."

The Regulators looked from one to the other, and while they hesitated, the clerk came close to Dalton and said in a low tone.

"Dalton, somebody has shot Duke Selwyn."

"Shot him! when? where? Is that why you want me at Mack's, Connolley? How did it happen? Is he seriously hurt?"

"Hurt!" It was Podunk who took up the word. "No, he ain't *hurt;* he's dead."

"At Mack's?" questioned Dalton, his eyes now fixed upon Podunk.

"Yes," broke in Charlie, the clerk; "they've carried him to Mack's. Oh, you needn't glower at me, Connolley. Dalton's going to have fair warning and fair play. You and your Regulators are organized to hunt stage robbers; you don't constitute a judge and a jury. You and Mack have put your heads together, and mean to accuse Dalton; but you ain't the men that'll conduct the inquiry; Mitchell knows his business, I reckon. Dalton, these men," running his eye from one to the other, "seven of them, have come here to escort you to Mack's, and confront you with the body; they wanted to make it a surprise."

Dalton's face was very pale but his voice was quite calm when he said: "Charlie, you're a good fellow. As for these gentleman, I'm greatly obliged to them."

"Now, Mr. Charlie," cried Podunk, coming toward them, "you're a well-meanin' chap, and I ain't going to lay it up

agin you, but you've told *one* confounded lie. You've counted one nose too many. *I* didn't come here to act as body guard, and I ain't agoin' to. If this ere gentleman likes my looks, and wants my society, all right; I go. If *not*, all right; I don't go."

"See here, stranger," said Connolley wrathfully, "I begin to think you'll need a good deal of watchin'."

"That's what my mother allus said," replied Podunk promptly; "and 'tain't for me to dispute either one of ye."

Connolley was a rough man, none too sympathetic, and inclined to cling doggedly to his own opinions; but he was honest, he meant to be just, and had been chosen Chief of the Regulators because of his untiring zeal in any cause he might espouse, and of his lion-like courage. He saw that his men were amused at the cool drollery of the eccentric Podunk, and he was himself impressed by the manner of Dalton.

"Mr. Dalton," he said slowly, "you know me and my men; they don't generally bite before they bark. It's understood at Mack's, and amongst us, that you and Selwyn had hot words last night, and that you left the place early, in a rage. Selwyn and Aileen Lorne went from Mack's together, after the performance; and half an hour later, Selwyn was found dead in one of Smith's cellars. Mack sent Piper for you almost immediately, and you *wasn't to be found.* Now, as Charlie here says, we ain't neither judge nor jury, but we're about the only perlice that Caledonia, has got, and it's our business to see that ye appear before Mitchell, an' tell what ye know about this affair. The inquest 'll open up in half an hour, and it'll probably be a long one."

Philip Dalton was not slow of apprehension, and he saw his position clearly, even before Connolley had ended his

harangue. He was already a suspected man; in twenty-four hours he might be a man accused; and he knew what that would mean in Caledonia. Keenly alive to his situation, he was still outwardly as calm as if nothing had occurred to ruffle his composure.

"I'm glad to hear you talk so reasonably, Connolley," he said; "and I am ready to go with you. If Duke Selwyn has met with foul play, you can't be more anxious than I am to see justice done. Come, we have wasted time enough."

"Look here, Dalton," broke in the friendly clerk, "are you going to set out for a siege like this without a mouthful of breakfast to hold you up? I guess Mitchell can wait; if he can't—"

"Charlie," interrupted Dalton, "I appreciate your thoughtfulness; but I am anxious to see for myself how it has fared with poor Selwyn. I can get a bite at Mack's, you know. But wait a moment, Connolley; I must speak to the lady upstairs."

The little band of Regulators had gathered in a group about the entrance, and they stared at one another, amazed at his coolness, when he turned abruptly, went out into the hall and up the stairs.

He found Susan Collins standing just outside the parlor-door, straining her ear to catch a word from below; and as she was about to reënter the parlor, he detained her.

"My good girl," he said, "just stand here a moment and keep an eye on those men down stairs, won't you? I want to speak with Miss Wray without interruption."

Before the girl could frame a reply he brushed past her, entered the parlor, and closed the door.

"Well, of all the cheek!" muttered Susan. And staightway

she dropped upon one knee, and applied her eye to the key-hole. She could see that Miss Wray sat in a low chair beside the window, and that Philip Dalton stood near, bending toward her, speaking rapidly. Then the eye was withdrawn, and an ear glued to the small opening. For some moments she remained in this position, and then, a movement below attracting her attention, she attempted a difficult feat; her face was toward the stairway, and while she listened she also watched.

Possibly this double effort was somewhat confusing, or her interest for the moment may have centered in what was passing before her eyes. Be this as it may, while she looked she forgot to listen, and, the parlor door opening suddenly, she found herself confronted by Philip Dalton and Barbara Wray, in the very act and attitude of an eavesdropper.

"So," ejaculated Dalton, his face showing the contempt he felt, "you were listening!"

The girl colored scarlet and scrambled to her feet, her eyes instinctively seeking the face of Miss Wray. But that young lady favored her with one scornful glance, and turned to Philip Dalton.

"Good-by, Mr. Dalton," she said, extending her hand. "Seeing how *you* can bear trials has given me strength to face my own. Whatever comes of this, you are sure of my friendship and sympathy, and I am glad to know that you are near me."

He held her hand for a moment, bowed gravely over it, and, without a word, hurried down the stairs.

He found Connolley in the hall below, and two or three of his men grouped in the doorway.

"Patience, Connolley," he said, and passing through the

group about the door approached the desk, where the clerk was making a pretense of writing. "Charlie," he said, in a low tone, "the lady upstairs is an old acquaintance. She is in trouble, and alone. If you can render her any service, in case I do not come back, you will be amply repaid."

Charlie looked up, and as their eyes met he extended his hand.

"There you are, Dalton," he said. "I'll stand by you, and the young lady may command me. I'll go and place myself at her disposal immediately, if you wish."

"Do so, Charlie, and thank you. Now, Connolley."

While they were speaking, the man Podunk was leaning against the office desk, apparently wrapped in meditation; and as they moved toward the entrance Connolley called out:

"Say you, Podunk, ain't you coming along?"

"I don't know," said Podunk shifting his position carelessly. "The society'll be purty good here after you're gone. Don't you be so anxious about *me;* you ain't my mother. I'll be there afore I'm wanted, you hear me."

When Philip Dalton passed down the stairs, Barbara Wray walked to the window, and leaning her forehead against the pane stood motionless until she had seen him go down the street, walking firmly and with head erect, while Connolley and the Regulators followed shamefacedly at his heels. When they were out of sight she turned and confronted her companion.

"Miss Collins," she said firmly, "if you will name a sum that will indemnify you for your time and expense in coming here with me, I will pay it, and pay your passage home. I have no further need of your services."

"I'd like to know why—" began the girl.

Barbara put up a hand to check her speech.

"You cannot remain with me," she said decidedly. "You have convinced me of you unfitness. We will not discuss the matter. Be so good as to secure another room and take your baggage from mine. I will remain here until it is done."

She turned and reseated herself by the window, but she was not to have the last word. Susan, who was standing at bay in the centre of the room, turned and flounced to the door.

"Oh, I'll *go* fast enough," she said in a voice that was husky with rage. "I ain't anxious to stay with you, anyway. I only wanted to get here, and I've done it. That's all *I* care about. I didn't mean to hang around you long. I'm as glad to be quit as you are."

When the Regulators, with the man whom they already considered their prisoner, had passed out of sight, and Charlie and Podunk were quite alone in the office, the latter broke out.

"Wall, if there's anything on this earth that's mean, it's shootin' a man in the back. I tell ye I wouldn't like to be in that fellow's shoes. You just bet I wouldn't walk off ahead of a gang like that."

"What *would* you do?" asked Charlie carelessly.

"I'd jest whip out my two Colt's, shut my eyes and shoot 'em off, and then leg it for the mountains."

"Umph!" sniffed Charlie, "you'd raise thunder, wouldn't you? But you are taking it for granted that Dalton is guilty."

"Great snakes! don't you s'pose he is?"

"No, sir, I don't, and I won't! He's in a bad box, not a doubt of it, but he never shot Selwyn any more that I did.

He's a whiter man than Duke Selwyn ever was!"

"Wal, I'll be sizzled! How opinions do differ, don't they! Why, down there"—nodding in the direction of Mack's—"they carry the notion that the dead feller was about the only pure-blooded white man that ever struck the territory."

"May the mischief take 'em!" cried Charlie in a rage. "Mack, indeed! Duke Selwyn was his backer, and the backer of half the gambling hells in Caledonia, that's what *he* was. He was too fine a gentleman to dirty his hands with the pasteboards, and he kept his operations hidden, but *I* know the man. Back in the States he was a boss gambler."

Charlie checked himself suddenly and looked suspiciously at Podunk. But that genius met his gaze with a face of perfect candor, and only said in a low tone, as if to himself:

"Wal, I'll be sizzled!" Then after a moment's silence he suddenly asked: "Say, what makes them Regulators call you *Tenderfoot?*"

Charlie flushed, but replied promptly: "Because I've not been here long enough to have become as hard as a brickbat. I can't drink so much, nor swear so fluently, as the rest. I've got a little respect left for women, and decency, and I haven't killed a man yet. There!"—flinging himself out of his chair with an angry jerk, for Dalton's misfortunes had put him thoroughly out of temper—"I'm going to look after the young lady. You can go back to Mack's, and tell them what I have said, if you want to."

Podunk yawned and stretched himself.

"Thank'ee," he said coolly, "mebbe I will."

He moved toward the outer door, while Charlie, without so much as a glance in his direction, went out of the office and up the stairs.

"Podunk," said that genius to himself as he turned his face toward Mack's, "I shouldn't wonder if that feller would do."

CHAPTER VII.

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.

At midnight, of the same twenty-four hours that were Duke Selwyn's last on earth, a low-bodied, heavy-wheeled, rattling stage-coach was rapidly crossing a level stretch of land that lay at the foot of the last and lowest mountain range to the west of Caledonia. It was eastward bound, and carried four inside passengers, while a fifth, muffled to the chin to keep out the chill mountain wind, sat erect upon the box beside the driver.

It was the Rockville stage, carrying the mail, and a moderate "treasure" belonging to one of the miners within. It had had a good passage thus far, and the occupants of the inside were congratulating themselves.

"We ain't so far from Caledonia as we might be," sagely remarked one of the four—a "bust up" miner, journeying homeward with just enough money in his pocket to pay his passage.

"We're further than I wish we was," grumbled the miner who escorted his treasure eastward. "I don't believe in hollerin' till we are out of the woods."

The two remaining passengers, "tourists" from the East,

who had visited Rockville to see what they might, and with a view to speculation should a favorable opportunity offer, but who were returning from their tour very much as they came —roused themselves from recumbent attitudes, and one of them asked:

"How far are we now from Caledonia?"

"Fifteen miles, I reckon," said the broken-down miner; "maybe eighteen."

"We're just this side of Death Pass," said the miner with the treasure, "and I wish we were t'other side."

"So do I," said the tourist who had not before spoken. "I remember the place when we came west—an ugly road even by daylight."

"But it's near town," said the other tourist. "It can't be more than ten miles."

"Twelve," corrected the impoverished miner.

"I wish it was only two," muttered his luckier neighbor. "I'd rather meet a stage robber anywhere along the line than in Death Pass."

"Why?" asked the other.

"Why! 'Cause it's the most perfect ambush; and the worst things have happened there."

"What has happened there?" asked one of the tourists.

"Robberies and murder, and once, when the route was first laid, a woman was carried off to the mountains and held for ransom."

"Pooh!" said the miner who had nothing to lose, "there ain't been a robber in the Pass for three months. It's back there, higher up, that you need to look out. I tell you we've been mighty lucky to git down the mountains with our appetites all hunkey."

"Hello!" exclaimed the younger of the tourists, as the stage came to a sudden halt, "what are we stopping for driver?"

"Nothin'," replied the driver, as he clambered down from his box, "only I want to look over the tacklin' a bit. We're comin' to a rough piece of road, and I don't want to take any chances if there should be a little strain on any of the gearin'."

"Umph!" grunted the anxious miner, "that means we're comin' to Death Pass."

"Why, yes," said the driver, flashing his lantern about among the wheels, "that's what we're comin' to, sure as you're alive. Ain't afeard, are ye?"

To this the miner returned an indignant denial, and leaned out of the opposite window to peer through the gloom at the outside passenger, who had dropped lightly to the ground, and new stood stretching his limbs and swinging his arms as if he enjoyed the exercise. There was a feeble, rapidly waning moon, and they could dimly distinguish each other's forms through the darkness.

"I wish we could have a little more moon," said the miner.

"Or fewer clouds," responded the tall outside passenger. And then, as the driver passed him and began to examine the harness, he came close to the window and said in a low tone: "I hope you are well armed, gentlemen?"

There was a chorus of responses in the affirmative, while one of the tourists asked anxiously:

"Do you anticipate trouble, sir?"

"Oh, no; but we are approaching the scene of previous attacks, and a wise man is on his guard, you know. I think we are safe enough but in case of attack don't be slow to use your weapons. All ready, driver? So am I."

He mounted to his place with a quick, springing movement that caused the driver to say: "Well, you are tolerable limber;" and in a moment they were again under way.

"Yes," said the outside passenger, "I'm accustomed to use my legs."

"And how about your arms?"

"I don't think they are quite paralyzed. Hello! how suddenly one comes upon the timber."

They were making a descent into a narrow gorge, and at its foot was the belt of timber through which, for two miles, the road wound in and out.

"Yes," said the driver, shutting up his lantern and putting it between his knees, "we're almost into the Pass."

"Why do you shut your lantern here? This road is rough enough to need illumination."

"You see," said the driver in a half whisper, "if the stage stoppers *should* happen to give us a surprise party, the lantern would show 'em just where to shoot. *I* don't want to be hit—do you?"

"Not exactly; but it would tell us where to shoot, too, wouldn't it?"

The driver leaned forward and touched up one of his horses.

"I never seen a young feller, full of vim and with a pistol in his pocket, that didn't talk big about shootin' before he got a chance," he said dryly. "But they hardly ever come to time."

"Well," said his passenger good naturedly, "that don't apply to me. I haven't a pistol in my pocket."

"What! You travel these roads and ain't got a pistol?"

"Not in my pocket."

"Oh, it's in yer sachel. Well, that's Tenderfoot all over! But I reckon it wouldn't matter much. If we *should* meet the foot pads, you just take my advice and fling up your fists when they tell you to."

"I will," said his listener quietly, "and what would you do?"

"Oh, I know what *I'd* do. Don't you worry about me. I'd take care of myself to the best of my ability. But I guess we're safe for this time. We are pretty well on our way through the Pass, and I don't see nothing ahead. It ain't because I'm blind either. I can peek a good ways through the dark; it's all in the trainin'."

He did not turn his head as he spoke. He was bending slightly forward, whip and reins well in hand, and his feet firmly braced, and he could not see that the young man by his side was also leaning forward, and that his two keen eyes were peering into the darkness. Suddenly the coach swung around a slight curve, and they came in sight of an opening in the timber. The road across it was narrow and hedged about by rocks and underbrush, but there were no trees for the space of a few rods, and, as if to aid their vision, the moon showed half her face beneath a veil of cloud.

Suddenly the driver drew himself erect, and, tightening the reins, chirruped to his horses. At the same moment the young man bent down, and catching one hand in the rail at the side of the box, swung himself half round like an acrobat, so that his head was close to the window nearest him.

"Quick!" said he, in a sharp whisper, "out with your weapons!" And then, as the horses plunged forward at a gallop, he swung himself back and sat erect beside the driver. The hand by which he had supported himself slipped into a

pocket of his loose top coat and came out again, and he sat moveless, gazing straight ahead.

A few more plunges of the horses, a few more revolutions of the wheels, and then both driver and passenger could plainly distinguish a number of dark, moveless forms drawn up on either side of the road.

Still the driver held tight his reins, and said never a word. When they were almost abreast of the sentinel-like figures, a loud, clear voice called out.

"Halt, or we fire!"

Instantly the driver uttered a loud yell, and the long whip, held ready in his hand, fell furiously upon the backs of the already galloping horses.

"Halt!" cried the voice again.

Again the whip fell, the driver shouted to the now frantic beasts, and the coach was opposite the double line of men—was dashing, rumbling and swaying down the Pass!

And now the young man upon the box starts into action, just as a third command rings out, accompanied by a pistol shot that whizzes close to the driver's head. As they whirl past the shadowy forms, he lifts two steady hands, each holding a revolver, and fires two shots at the figures nearest him. Then, as they dash on, he turns upon the seat, throws himself across the top of the coach, and sends two more balls back among the enemy.

These two last shots are followed by a scream and a groan; there is no sound of pursuit, and the coach dashes on around a second curve. They have run the gauntlet, and escaped from the robbers; but now the horses, maddened and terrified, have broken from the control of the driver! They are running away!

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OVATION TO A TENDERFOOT.

Barbara Wray had resumed her seat by the parlor window. Charlie the clerk, bent upon his chivalrous errand, had just set foot upon the top stair, and Podunk had taken one step in the direction of the Varieties, when the Rockville stage rattled up to the door of the St. Charles.

It was mud-bespattered, and bore traces of recent mishap. There had been a breakdown, and a serious one, if an observer might judge from the splintered panels, broken springs, and sundry temporary repairs to vehicle and harness in the shape of knots of rope, lashings of leather, and bits of string. As if this were not enough to fix the attention of all Caledonia, the foam-flecked, panting horses were driven to the door by a handsome young man, dressed in the garments of civilization, and wearing *gloves*, while the lawful Jehu of the stage sat beside him with his arm in a sling.

The sight of the stage arrested the footsteps of Podunk, who stared at the indifferent young man upon the box. And the sound of its rattling wheels caused Charlie to turn at the head of the stairs, and rush down, three steps at a time.

The street had seemed almost deserted, but no sooner did the stage appear than it came to life, and before the young man upon the box had fairly set his feet upon *terra firma*, the vehicle was surrounded, and a fusillade of questions was poured out upon the driver.

As they dash on he sends two more balls back among the enemy! —Page 71.

The young man, who had thrown aside the reins, moved a little away from the crowd, turned back the collar of his grey top coat, and lifted his hat from his head to pass a handkerchief across his brow. As he did this his eyes were turned toward the house, and lifted in a sweeping glance, and this glance encountered another, that of a pale faced, lovely girl, who, meeting his gaze, flushed and quickly drew back from the window.

"Hello! Timotheus," called Charlie, running down the steps and elbowing his way through the crowd, "what's happened to *you*?"

The miners and the two tourists had scrambled out, and were being eagerly scrutinized by the lookers on, but the driver still sat upon his box, wearing a look of grave importance. The appearance of Charlie and his question seemed to afford him the fitting opportunity for which he had waited, and he turned toward the crowd, waving his uninjured hand above his head and bringing it down until it pointed directly to the young man who had lately vacated one half the stage box.

"Gentlemen," said he loftily, "allow me to pint out to ye the only man I *know* of that ain't afraid of stage robbers." And with this severe hit at his inside passengers, the driver let himself slowly and carefully down to the ground.

Barbara Wray, had drawn back from the window but she could still see the movement of the arm, and she impulsively bent forward again to discover the man indicated. It was easy to identify the redoubtable personage, for every eye was turned toward him; and then there was a tumult of voices, eager questions, and rapid answers. She could hear enough to assure her that the stage had been attacked, and that the hand-

some, careless-looking stranger had been the hero of the occasion.

The driver was not disposed to be communicative, and hurried away to care for his lame and bruised arm, while some one led off the tired horses. But the crowd remained gathered about the unlucky miner, who seemed to have ample leisure, and from him they heard the story of the attack.

"It's my opinion," said the narrator, in conclusion, "that we could a-walloped them critters like a book, if Tim u'd given us a show. There ain't a minit's doubt but that the young feller hit two of 'em where it hurt; an' if Tim had stopped the coach—but no, he jist laid on the whip, and the first thing we knew we was flyin' down the Pass, and the horses was runnin' away. The *next* thing we knowed, over we went. When we picked ourselves up, the young feller was as handy as ever. He helped Tim and the rest of us with a good will, and then took the ribbons like an old stager."

"Hurrah for the stranger," shouted an enthusiast in the crowd. And, "Where is he?" "Let's see him!" was the cry.

The young man had quietly secured his small valise, and gone with Charlie into the office; and into this sanctuary the lion hunters followed him.

"You'd better go out, sir," the clerk said in a low tone. "They're bent on having a look at you."

The young man laughed and turned toward the entrance; seeing which, the crowd fell back and greeted him with another cheer, as he stood in the doorway, three or four steps above them.

He lifted his hat from his head with a careless, graceful gesture, and there was a twinkle of humor in his dark, handsome eyes as he looked down upon them.

He was tall and finely formed, and in every movement there spoke the man of the world, and the natural leader. There was dignity and ease in all that he did; and an habitual gravity impressed upon every feature, save the eyes, where laughter sometimes lurked, even when the mouth was severe. Indeed, those eyes were so changeful, so full of expression, that they spoke when the lips were mute, and mirrored, when not controlled by a powerful will, his every mood. His features were dark, and almost faultless in their regularity; and there clung about him such an air of distinction, there was, between himself and the men before him, so marked a contrast in dress and bearing, as called forth a smile from Charlie, who stood at a window, an interested observer.

"Gentlemen," said the stranger, in a slow musical voice, "your appreciation is gratifying, but misplaced. You should bestow it upon the driver, who brought us through so gallantly. My shots were fired at random. If the fellows had succeeded in stopping the coach, I presume I should have thrown up my hands like any other Tenderfoot. However, walk in, gentlemen, and tell our friend Charlie, here, the name of your favorite beverage."

There was a yell of approval from the crowd, and a look of disappointment, almost disgust, upon the fair face of the unseen listener at the window above. The speaker withdrew into the office, the crowd poured in after him, and Charlie became active behind the bar.

While the crowd was drinking the health of the liberal stranger, Podunk elbowed his way to the spot where he stood, and extended a hand.

"Stranger, shake!" he said affably. "I like your style

sizzle me if I don't! If you wasn't so darned slick you might pass for a regular out and outer. Shake."

At the first word the young man gave an almost imperceptible start, and then a look of swift intelligence passed from eye to eye, and their hands met with a significant pressure.

And now the inside passengers came in for their share of attention from the children of nature, who were swift to applaud the strong and torment the weak, and the two tourists were glad to purchase immunity from their jests at the expense of a round of drinks each. At the second round, and while they were gathered about the unlucky tourists with much noise and hilarity, the stranger and Podunk stood for a moment aloof from the rest.

"Dick," said the stranger in an undertone, "what have you struck?"

"Trouble," answered Podunk in the same cautious manner. "There's an inquest just opened at Mack's Varieties that I want you to attend. There's work here for somebody."

CHAPTER IX.

AN INQUISITIVE JURYMAN.

Whatever else Caledonia lacked, and she lackd many things that were numbered among the necessities of civilization, she possessed an honest and efficient coroner.

It had occurred to many to wonder how such a man as Doctor Mitchell came to bestow himself and his talents upon this frontier town. He was grave, reserved, studious; there

was in him no indication of the spirit of the adventurer, none of the enthusiasm of the frontiersman, who pushes always westward and sees ever upon the distant horizon the long-sought for new land, flowing with milk and honey.

He came when Caledonia was in its incipiency, and the mines near the town were promising fortunes to the industrious seeker. But he did not so much as visit the mines until he had built for himself a primitive cottage—with office in front, and kitchen, bedroom and hall in the rear—and hung out the tin sign, brought with him from the East, and showing proof of much service and exposure to the weather, upon which was inscribed:

DOCTOR JOHN MITCHELL,
PHYSICIAN & SURGEON.

But whatever the motive which brought him to Caledonia, Doctor John Mitchell had made for himself a place among the Caledonians. He might almost be said to be the only inhabitant of that turbulent town who had commanded the respectful consideration of all classes, for, while there were a hundred hands ready and apt at setting blood a flowing, there was but one man who could successfully dress a dangerous wound, or carry a miner through a fever; and that one was Doctor Mitchell.

Added to this, he had no curiosity, and, seemingly, no prejudices. He never asked questions, except in his official capacity, and never proffered advice. He never drank in the saloons, nor played cards in the gambling houses; but he had no criticism for those who did. Indeed his tall gaunt form and iron grey head was occasionally seen behind some gambler's chair, or serenely overlooking a saloon fight. Once he

Dick, what have you struck?" "Trouble!" answered Podunk.—Page 77.

had been known to witness, with perfect equanimity, a knife contest between two miners who had been mutually cheating at cards, and mutually discovered; and to refuse to interfere until one of the two was *hors de combat*, when he promptly and silently dressed the wounds, and then with equal silence and promptitude left this place.

The Doctor's eccentricities were well known to all Caledonia, and they invested him with peculiar interest. But whatever may have been his motive for adopting so neutral, and, to his townsmen, satisfactory a line of conduct, it assuredly did not originate in an excess of caution, for he had more than once proved, upon occasion, that he feared no man.

But neutral as he may have been in his private character, he showed himself sufficiently active and efficient as Coroner to Caledonia; and he had taken the reins at Mack's, and set all things moving at an early hour.

To select a jury, however, was a work of time; and, in spite of Connolley's announcement to the contrary, the jury was not yet chosen at ten o'clock. When it was complete it numbered among its members Podunk and the elder of the lately arrived tourists, who, with the rest of Caledonia, had flocked to Mack's.

The first official act of Doctor Mitchell was to order a discontinuance of proceedings at the bar; and with better grace than might have been anticipated, Mack prepared and suspended before his shrine this placard:

N. B. No drinks to be had at this bar during the proceedings of the Coroner's inquest. MACK.

Before calling his first witness, Doctor Mitchell addressed the jurymen.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this inquiry must be a thorough one, and therefore will of necessity be long, perhaps tedious. Some of you are more or less strangers, and should it seem to you that you can obtain more light, and clearer ideas, upon any feature of the subject in hand by putting such questions to the witnesses as I may omit, because of my better knowledge or for any other reason, you are at liberty to interrogate—first, of course, making your wishes known to me."

"D'ye mean," queried Podunk with the air of a candid and well-meaning individual, bent upon doing his duty and understanding his position, "that we kin cross question the witnesses when we don't quite see the pint?"

"You can question the witnesses, when I have done with them, if you choose."

"Thank'ee," said Podunk with fervor.

The Regulators, with Connolly in command, were at hand, and busied themselves in keeping the promiscuous crowd back, as far as possible, from the inner room, where the body of Duke Selwyn still lay outstretched upon the gaming table, and where the Coroner, his jury, and the more important witnesses were seated.

Billy Piper was the first witness called, and he told how he, in company with the two girls, La Belle Florine and Stella Aubrey, had heard Selwyn's dying groans; and, afterwards, aided by Mountain Mag's lantern, found the body in the cellar. He told his story simply, and in so clear a manner that the Coroner scarcely found room for a question; and having ascertained, as nearly as Billy could guess, the precise time when they left Mack's and arrived opposite the cellars, the first witness was dismissed.

Stella Aubrey then came forward, and her story was much

the same. She was a tired, hollow-eyed young woman, as seen divested of her stage rouge and tinsel, and she seemed little troubled as to what those about her might think of her daylight *ensemble* She was carelessly, even shabbily dressed, and she told her story languidly, as if anxious to get it over.

"When Margaret Drood went into the cellar," said the Coroner slowly, "what did you do?"

"I went to the edge of the cellar and looked down."

"And you saw—what?"

"I saw the body of a man lying in the cellar, and Mountain Mag kneeling beside it."

"Could you recognize the body?"

"No; but I heard Mag say that it was Duke Selwyn."

"When Margaret Drood came out of the cellar, who was the first to leave the place?"

"I think that Florine and I went toward the boarding-house a minute, perhaps, before Billy Piper started."

"And Miss Drood remained by the cellar alone?

"If she was not alone we thought her so."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was very dark, and some one might have been concealed near the cellars."

The jury exchanged glances, and nods of approval: here was an exemplary witness.

"Have you the least reason for thinking that some one might have been concealed near the cellars?"

"No, sir."

"Is there any gentleman of the jury who wishes to question this witness?" the Coroner asked.

The jurymen glanced each at his neighbor, and Podunk glanced in turn at them all. Then, seeing that no one mani-

fested a desire to speak, he crossed one knee over the other, clasped his two hands about them both, cleared his throat, and said:

"*I'd* like to ask the lady a question or two, if yer Honor pleases."

"Proceed," said the Coroner.

"When you heard the second groan, Miss," began Podunk slowly, and with an apparent effort to speak with a propriety befitting the occasion, "who of you was first ter notice that some one was comin' a horseback?"

"I think it was Piper," replied the witness.

"Wal, now, when this young lady ye call Mountain Mag rode up, which way was her horse headed?"

"Sir?"

"Which way did she come from?"

"Oh! She was riding toward the East."

"Coming from this direction?" pointing westward.

"Yes, sir."

The witness began to manifest a little impatience, but the Coroner was looking with some curiosity at the inquiring juror, who hastened to say:

"Now, young woman, will you jest tell as near as ye can recollect, what was said and done after Mr. Piper hailed the young woman on the horse?"

"Mag rode close to the path, and inquired what was the matter, and if any one was hurt; and Billy asked for her lantern, and she gave it to him."

"What did she say when she gave him the lantern?"

"Nothing. Just then we all heard another groan."

"An' *then* she give him the lantern, eh?"

The witness started slightly.

"Come to think, I'm wrong," she said. "Mag didn't give him the lantern. Just as we heard the groan, her horse cavorted almost into the middle of the road. Mag laid on the whip and brought him back, jumped off, and went toward the cellar."

"Stop," said Podunk quickly. "Did she go straight to the cellar the first thing, or did she look around a bit?"

The witness seemed to consider. "She went straight to the cellar," she finally said. "I remember, now, Mag said, 'It sounded this way;' and went straight to the cellar."

"What did she do then?"

"She jumped down, and went and looked at the body. We could see her bending over it. Then she turned around, and said, 'It's Duke Selwyn.'"

"Thank'ee, Miss," said Podunk politely, "I ain't got no more to say."

And while Stella Aubrey retired to her seat, he settled back in his chair with the air of a man who has done a good thing, and is conscious of it.

Throughout the dialogue the keen eyes of the Coroner had rested upon his face, and Mack and several of the Regulators had looked their impatience at what they considered an unnecessary and irrelevant bit of by-play, indulged in, on the part of Podunk, for his own personal satisfaction. But the Coroner made no comment upon the questions put; and La Belle Florine took the stand.

Florine was younger than the Aubrey, full of pertness, and manifestly eager to be an effective witness. She told her story, the same in all essentials as that told by Piper and Stella Aubrey before her, in an inaccurate and discursive manner; and the Coroner found it necessary to bring her back to the point by frequent sharp reminders.

Acting upon the hint given by Podunk, or, perhaps to prevent that worthy from repeating his former questions, the Coroner led her up to the moment where she had walked away from the cellars, terrified and clinging to her companion's arm. And then, as before, he addressed the jury:

"Have you any questions to put to the witness, gentlemen?"

As before they looked at one another, and shook their heads. And, this ceremony concluded, Podunk again began to interrogate.

"When you and the other gal got home to your boardin'-house, Miss," he asked gravely, "what did you do?"

"Aubrey went straight to our room, but I wasn't sleepy; so I stopped at Miss Lorne's door to tell her the news."

"Now, who," queried Podunk, "is Miss what-d'ye-call-her?"

"Aileen Lorne. She's our lady ballad singer—she's sitting over there by Mountain Mag."

Many heads were turned, and twice as many eyes stared at the two young women, so strikingly unlike, seated at a distant window, side by side. But Podunk did not remove his eyes from the witness.

"What made ye so anxious to wake up that young lady to tell her bad news, eh?" he questioned.

"I didn't wake her up; she had just come in ahead of us; Duke Selwyn walked home with her. And I wanted to know what she would say."

"Wal, what *did* she say?"

"Nothing, at first. She just sat down and looked at me."

"Wal, go on."

"She seemed to think I was joking, and didn't pay much attention to me. So I told her to go to the window, and

watch the cellars. We both went and stood by the window till we saw them coming from here with lanterns; *that* seemed to convince her."

"And then, what did she say?"

"She said it was horrible, or something of that sort; and she looked awfully pale, and seemed all of a tremble. Then, all at once, she turned on me, and ordered me out of the room."

"Thank'ee, Miss," again said Podunk; and nodded to inform the Coroner that he had done.

There was a buzz of comment as the witness retired. Evidently Podunk was regarded as an inquisitive trifler; but contrary to the expectation of some, the Coroner made no remark upon his questions, and for a moment was busy jotting down memoranda in a small note book. Then he looked up and said:

"Let Margaret Drood come forward."

CHAPTER X.

MOUNTAIN MAG TESTIFIES.

While Billy Piper was telling his story, the handsome stranger who had been the hero of the stage-coach episode, sauntered carelessly into the outer saloon, accompanied by the clerk of the St. Charles. During the examination of the succeeding witnesses, the two had been slowly making their way toward the inner room. Some of the men who had been pre-

sent during the scene at the hotel readily fell back, and allowed the stranger to pass, and finally he secured standing room in the inner apartment, with a full view of Coroner, jury, and witnesses.

When Coroner Mitchell pronounced the name of Mountain Mag, this gentlemanly spectator happened, possibly by accident, to be glancing at Podunk; and the latter shot him a quick look, and by an almost imperceptible signal bade him pay close attention to the coming witness.

The stranger's hand went up to his mouth, as if to conceal a yawn; and then, as Mag advanced, he slowly turned his gaze towards her, scrutinizing her face and dress with an appearance of surprise and languid interest.

"Margaret," said the Coroner, speaking as if to an acquaintance for whom he felt much kindness, "will you tell us in your own way, how you happened to discover the body of Duke Selwyn?"

Mag bowed to the Coroner, and for a moment her eyes rested upon the face of Podunk. Then she began, speaking slowly, and with perfect composure.

"Three days ago," she said, "Monckton, who looks after my ranch, came to town, promising to return immediately, but he didn't, and I was kept busy until late last night. I was a good deal put out about Monckton; so, after everything was secured for the night, I made up my mind to look him up. I saddled Nick, and started on the trail. It was late—I don't know just what time—and I was leading Monck's horse. He had footed it in, but I wasn't sure of his being sober enough to walk back. It's ten miles from the ranch to town, and Monck's horse acted bad from the first, so I didn't get on very fast. After a while, when I thought he was

quieted down, he broke away from me, and tore off across the prairie. I followed, and felt sure of catching him, for he would run in circles, and seemed only bent on a little sport. But I hadn't a lariat, and he had been idle and was full of mischief. After I had wasted a good deal of time chasing him, and just as the moon was going down, and it was getting too dark to see much, he turned and made straight for the ranch; and then I came on into town."

Podunk was seated beside the tourist juror, and while the latter listened, and looked gravely wise, Podunk whispered from time to time a word or two behind his hand.

"When I got into town," went on Mag, "I went to most of the places at the South End, inquiring for Monck. I had aimed to get here in time to look in at the performance, but the lights were out in the Theatre; so I turned the corner and was riding slowly along, wondering where I had better go next, when Billy Piper called me, and I stopped, as he has said."

"Then you agree with him and the others? You heard a groan as you were about to dismount?"

"Yes. I had checked my horse just opposite the opening between the two dirt piles. It sounded beyond them; and I naturally went straight ahead until the cellar stopped me."

"Was there no sign of life? no movement after you were in the cellar?"

"No, but the body was quite warm. He had just breathed his last."

"And you saw nothing, heard nothing, to indicate that the murderer or some one else might be in the vicinity?"

"I didn't hear anything, and I only saw Billy Piper and the two girls."

"And you told *them* they had better go home?"

"Yes. They were of no use there; and I was not afraid."

"What did you do while Piper was gone?"

"Nothing."

"Did you approach the body, or examine it again?"

"No."

"And you came back here with the escort?"

"Yes."

"That is all, I believe."

"I would like to ask," broke out the grave visaged Tourist, "I would now like to ask the lady if she knows what time the moon went down last night, or this morning?"

Mag looked disconcerted. "No," she said, "I don't."

"How far from town were you when the led horse galloped toward home?"

"About five miles; half way, I guess."

"Is the trail a good one?"

"Very fair now."

"Do you usually ride fast?"

"Yes."

"Then how does it happen, if you were only five miles from town at one o'clock—for at that hour the moon went down—that being a rapid rider, you did not arrive here until nearly or quite three o'clock?"

For a moment Mag stood silent, her eyes fixed upon the face of the questioner, her own face inscrutable. Then she said:

"I suppose I should have said that, as I was running over the prairies, my horse seemed to go lame, and so I rode him quite slow. After a while he appeared to be getting worse, and then I got down and looked at his feet. I found a pebble in one

of his hoofs, and after I took that out he came on all right. I don't carry a watch and didn't keep close track of the time."

Some smiles, nods, and expressive glances were exchanged among the listeners. It was evident that Mag was a favorite; and the juror retired into himself, with a bow of dismissal. But again Podunk took up the word.

"When you came here with the rest, how long did ye stay?" he asked.

Mag started slightly, but promptly replied:

"I don't know exactly; I went out after a while to look for Monckton."

"Did ye find him?"

"Yes; at Doty's."

"What did ye say to him?"

"I said he had better go home, before he lost all his money."

"Did he go?"

"Yes. I told him he could feed my horse and rub her well, and then ride her home slowly."

"Didn't ye tell him about the murder?"

"Yes."

"Didn't he kind o' want to stay an' hear the inquest?"

"He didn't say so. Murders are pretty common here."

"Wal, young woman, I won't hinder ye much longer. I heard a young man, Piper, say ye was the first to recognize the body—that ye recognized it the minit ye put yer eyes on it. Did ye know the man?"

"If I hadn't," said Mag, dryly, "I couldn't have recognized him."

Again there was a ripple of amusement at the expense of Podunk; but he, in no way abashed, persisted in his questioning.

"I mean," he said, "was you acquaintances, or did you jest know him by sight?"

"We were acquainted. That is, he had paid a visit to my ranch—nearly all strangers who come to Caledonia do—and I used to see him often about the streets here."

"Thank'ee, Mam," said Podunk; and leaned back in his chair, looking as if, for the time, all his troubles were over.

Mountain Mag fixed her steady gaze upon him for a moment, as if trying to read his motive and meaning. Then she turned slowly away.

"Doc," whispered Mack, who was seated conveniently near the Coroner, "I'd stop that fellows mouth, if I were you."

"Mack," replied Doctor Mitchell, without looking up from his note book, "if you say so, I'll resign in your favor. But until I do, *I'm* the Coroner."

Again he consulted his notes, and wrinkled his brow in seeming perplexity. Then he turned to the jury.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it seems to me necessary to make some inquiries that will cause a delay. There are some persons whose names I now have on my list, who must have a hearing. We will call one more witness, and then adjourn until half-past one o'clock. Miss Lorne, will you come forward?"

CHAPTER XI.

AILEEN.

The stir and evident curiosity which followed this call for Aileen Lorne, was proof that something unusually interesting in the way of testimony was anticipated, or else that the young lady herself was the object of special interest. And this, indeed, was the case.

Aileen Lorne had been but eight weeks in Caledonia, and although during that time she had appeared almost nightly behind the footlights at Mack's, she was seldom seen abroad by daylight. It was known to all present who had seen her on the stage, that, outside of the Theatre, she made, and desired to make, no acquaintances.

Mountain Mag, Stella Aubrey, and La Belle Florine were familiar figures to all save the latest comers; but Aileen Lorne, as she advanced quietly toward the Coroner, was, by her beauty and her grace, as well as by the fact of her newness and exclusiveness, an object of more than ordinary interest to all. She was simply dressed, but in the best of taste, and her manner was extremely unaffected, self possessed and ladylike.

As she sat in her remote corner, her face had been concealed by a dark veil. This she removed as she stood before the Coroner, revealing a lovely face, lighted by dark, mournful eyes, and a pure, pale complexion, with no hint of color ex-

cept where it glowed in two deeply roseate lips. This rare face was crowned with hair of the palest gold, making altogether a combination strangely, strikingly beautiful.

Doctor Mitchell was, perhaps, the only male resident of Caledonia who had not seen Aileen Lorne upon the stage; and he now gazed upon her with profound surprise, not unmixed with admiration. She was as different in look, in dress, in bearing, from the other goddesses who presided at Mack's, as is the full moon from a tallow dip; and there were others beside Doctor Mitchell, who, seeing her thus, indulged in this or a similar reflection. As she stood quietly before him, with her dark eyes fixed upon his face, the Coroner seemed to collect his thoughts, and addressed her.

"You are Aileen Lorne?"

"Yes;" in a low, clear, steady voice.

"Is that your real name?"

"It is the only name by which I am known, upon the stage or off it."

"Well, perhaps it is sufficient. You knew Duke Selywn?"

"I did."

"How long had you known him?"

She hesitated a moment, and her eyes searched his face; then—

"I made his acquaintance after I came to Caledonia; I think that was nearly eight weeks ago," she said.

"During this time have you seen him often?"

"Yes; frequently."

"Where?"

"At the Theatre, almost always?"

"Almost?—please name the exceptions."

"I have taken supper with him three times, in the *Cafe* at-

tached to this place, and on each occasion he has walked with me to my boarding-house."

"And was last night one of these occasions?"

Aileen's pale face became even paler.

"It was," she said sadly.

"Miss Lorne, was anything ever said or hinted by Mr. Selwyn that would induce you to think that he had an enemy?"

The pale face was half averted. She dropped her eyes, and remained so long silent that the Coroner repeated the question. "Mr. Selwyn seldom alluded to his personal affairs in my hearing," she said slowly. "I do not think that he had an enemy."

"Miss Lorne, this is an evasion. I ask you if he said any word, or if you knew of any circumstance, that might give you reason to think he had an enemy?"

His voice was stern. Before he had ceased speaking, the girl lifted her head and fixed her dark eyes upon his face. When he paused for her reply, she answered firmly:

"No."

"Miss Lorne are you aware that Mr. Selwyn and Mr. Dalton exchanged angry words in one of the boxes last night?"

"I heard something of the sort said in the dressing-room, but I paid little attention to the gossip."

"Did you know that Mr. Dalton left the Theatre immediately after, and at an unusually early hour?"

"I saw Mr. Dalton, at or near ten o'clock, in one of the boxes. He bade me good-night, and said he was going home."

"Is that all he said?"

"All that I can recall."

"And when did you see Mr. Dalton next?"

"Within this hour. I saw him where he now sits."

She turned half around, and her eyes rested for a moment

"You are Aileen Lorne?" said the Coroner.—Page 93.

upon Philip Dalton's face. He was watching her intently, and as their eyes met he bowed, as if to acquiesce in her statement.

"During your supper in the *Cafe*, or your walk home afterward, did Mr. Selwyn mention Dalton's name, Miss Lorne?"

"He may have done so, in a casual way."

"Did he not speak of him angrily—with resentment?"

"He certainly did not. Mr. Selwyn was in excellent spirits; I never saw him more—complacent."

"He did not mention their quarrel, then?"

"If he did, it was to treat it as a jest."

"Miss Lorne, when did you last see Duke Selwyn?"

She was silent a moment, and seemed to consider.

"At the foot of the boarding-house steps. He lifted his hat to me, and was out of my sight in the darkness almost instantly."

"And where were you?"

"Standing at the top of the steps, in the doorway."

"Did you meet any one on your walk from the theatre?"

"No one."

"Did any one pass you as you stood talking upon the steps?"

"I saw no one."

"Did you hear anything?"

"No, sir."

"How long did you remain in the door after Mr. Selwyn left you?"

"Not a moment."

"Where did you go?"

"Straight to my room."

"Did you hear no report of firearms?"

"None."

"And yet it was very near."

"True."

"Miss Lorne,"—the Coroner hesitated over this question, "upon what terms did you stand with Mr. Selwyn?"

"Sir!"

"Was Mr. Selwyn in any sense of the word a suitor of yours?"

"Mr. Selwyn, sir, was a man of the world; I never supposed him susceptible. He chose to flatter me for his own amusement, and I chose to permit it."

"Then"—again he hesitated over his question—"you did not hold him in special regard?"

There was an indignant flash in her eyes as she answered firmly: "I did *not*."

All eyes were fixed upon her as she spoke, and so there was none to note the quick look that crossed the face of Philip Dalton, and left it a shade less somber.

"At present, Miss Lorne," said the Coroner, "you are dismissed. I may wish to call you again, this afternoon. You will attend?"

She bowed haughtily, pulled down her veil, and withdrew.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the Coroner, "I wish you to go in a body to the St. Charles Hotel, and to remain there until we open our investigation this afternoon."

At this moment, Connolley, the Regulator Chieftain, entered the room, and elbowed his way to the side of the Coroner.

"I must see ye alone, Mitchell," he whispered excitedly. "I've found what'll hang our fine friend over there."

"You weren't sent after a rope, Connolley," said the Coroner shortly.

He turned impatiently and came forcibly in contact with the person of Podunk, who had become separated from his fellow-jurymen, and seemed endeavoring to join their ranks.

"Consarn ye!" he began wrathfully, and then checked himself, seeming to see the Coroner for the first time. "I didn't know it was yer Honor," he muttered; "excuse me."

As the crowd pushed and jostled its way out of the saloon, the good-looking stranger stationed himself beside one of the windows, and watched them pass.

Among the last to come from the inner room, owing to their positions at its further side, was Philip Dalton and Aileen Lorne. He had not been near enough to speak with her during the morning, but he was walking close beside her now, and talking in low, eager tones.

He brushed past the stranger without seeing him; walked with Aileen to the outer door; lifted his hat, as she turned away, and then strode briskly toward the hotel. He did not once look back, and so could not know that the stranger was close at his heels.

Upon reaching the hotel, he avoided the office, already overrun with an eager and talkative crowd, and went straight up stairs to his room. Footsteps ascended the stairs close behind him; but yet he did not look back. At the door of his apartment, however, he turned sharply, confronting the man who was still at his heels.

As their eyes met, a glad exclamation broke from his lips. And then a pair of strong hands seized him; pushed him within his own room, and half way across it; closed and bolted the door.

"Van Vernet!" cried Dalton, with outstretched hands, and eager brightening eyes. "In the name of wonder how came *you* here?"

CHAPTER XII.

"TWO OF A KIND."

"I came," said the stranger, with a mellow laugh, "pretty much as you did, by way of the stairs."

"But here—in Caledonia—when—"

"This morning, then; and upon the top of the Rockville coach. And, after you, I'm probably the most interesting live man in town at this moment."

"Interesting!"—a shadow fell upon Dalton's face. "You say *next* to me; do you know, then—"

"I know that you're in trouble, Dalton. I heard a breath of it before I left this house, and I was present at the preliminaries this morning. I know that there's been a man killed; that you had quarrelled with him; and that some of these fellows are inclined to suspect you." That the speaker was not prepared to share in these suspicions was evident from his tone. "But it can't amount to anything. The inquiry is only begun. It will end in the discovery of the criminal."

"I'm not sure of that. There's plenty of prejudice in the crowd; and if they turn their attention to me, they won't guard the other side. While they are worrying me, the other fellow will escape."

"And *I'm* not so sure of *that*. I fancy there's a man to the fore, down there, who won't be influenced by prejudice, and who will see to the bottom of things."

"Who is that?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell just now; and we can't afford to

hold a long conference. I landed here, as I have said, only this morning; and the first thing I am told is, that I will do well to go to the inquest at Mack's. Nothing surprises a detective, you know—at least nothing in that line—and the advice was good. But it did startle me a little to hear your name tossed about among these fellows, and I wasn't prepared to believe that the Dalton they discussed was the Dalton I knew, until I saw you at Mack's. I kept myself out of your sight as well as I could, for I didn't care about surprising you there. And I only want to say now, that in case this business *does* become serious you may depend upon Van Vernet."

"Thank you, Vernet; you are the man of all others whom I would wish at hand in time of need."

"Well, being at hand, I intend to stay until this affair terminates. And now I am going. There is some one else I must have a word with, before the afternoon investigation opens. It will be wise for us not to be seen in conversation. There is no one here who knows me in my true character, and at present it is best so."

He turned toward the door, but Dalton's quick hand detained him.

"Stop, Vernet," he said. "God forgive me, I had almost forgotten the troubles of another. Did you know Stephen Wray?"

"What, old Wray, the millionaire?"

"Yes."

"I can't say that I knew him; of course all New York knows of his wealth, and his many schemes for money getting."

"And his daughter—did you know her?"

"No."

"Well, Miss Wray is here, in this house, alone."

"Impossible!"

"I met her accidentally in the hall this morning. I could hardly believe my eyes; and I had not ten minutes to converse with her before I was dragged away to that horrible inquest. From what I could gather, Wray must have been speculating in the mines hereabouts, through some intermediate party. Three months ago he came to Caledonia. She had a few letters from him, and then they ceased. She has been half frantic about him, and a short time ago received a letter which informed her that he was here, too ill to travel, and begging her to secure a companion and come to him at once. She arrived yesterday."

"And her father?" questioned Vernet.

"He is not here. I am sure of it. I have been in Caledonia two months, and he hasn't been here. Miss Wray is almost distracted. I left her recovering from a swoon."

Vernet was silent for a moment.

"It's a strange business," he said. "I can't fancy Stephen Wray asking his daughter to such a place as this." And then a recollection of a lovely face seen through a window flashed upon him, and he said: "You say she is here in this house?"

"Yes; and sorely in need of a friend. Vernet—" He hesitated, and scanned the face of the detective anxiously.

"I comprehend," said Vernet smiling. "You want to enlist me with a proviso. If you are not otherwise occupied, *you* will be that friend. If you cannot serve the lady *I* may be your deputy."

"Will you?"

"I wouldn't be much of a man if I refused. I seem to be getting into business with a vengeance; shouldn't wonder if the matter that brought me here would have to stand aside."

"I've been thinking, said Dalton with a half smile, "what that could be."

"I don't mind telling you, Dalton. You're sure not to be one of them. I'm here to hunt stage robbers."

"What! Alone?"

"Yes, alone—at present. Hark!"

There was a faint sound at the door, such as might have been made by a person passing and brushing against it. Vernet went quickly toward it and bent his head.

Then he turned to Dalton and whispered: "Stand back."

Dalton moved quickly and lightly in the direction indicated, taking a position where he could not be seen by any one outside the door, which Vernet then softly opened.

It was Podunk who stood without.

"Come into this next room a minute," whispered Podunk. "I've got something to tell you."

Vernet nodded, and then drew back and partly closed the door.

"Excuse me a minute, Dalton," he said, "and open the door when I knock."

Dalton bowed assent, and Vernet went out. Podunk was standing before the door of the room next to that occupied by Dalton. As Vernet came toward him, he pushed it open.

"Come in," he whispered.

When they were both within, he closed and locked the door. This done, he silently extended his hand to Vernet, who shook it warmly, saying:

"I can hardly believe that my friend Dick Stanhope is hidden under all that hair and flannel. Dick, you never wore a more perfect disguise."

"Oh, this is nothing difficult, Van," laughed the other. "I'm perfectly at home in it."

"Judging from your performances at the inquest this morning, I should think you were. I always said the stage lost a 'bright particular' when you turned yourself into a detective. What are you calling yourself, Dick?"

"Podunk."

"Podunk! Well, that's original—like yourself. But what's on your mind, old man?"

"This Dalton, Van. I suspected from the first that he might be the Dalton of whom I have heard you speak. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"And if I know you, and I guess I do, you mean to see him through this scrape, eh?"

"Yes," said Vernet emphatically.

"Good; and I'm with you. Well, I've made a small discovery, and looked you up to give you the benefit of it."

"What is it?"

"Just at we were dispersing, that fire-eater, Connolley, came puffing up to the Coroner, and put something into his hand. From the few words I caught, I judge that they have been searching Dalton's room—that precious rascal, Mack, put them up to it—and that it was done without the Coroner's knowledge or advice. The thing, whatever it may be, was rolled up in a dirty handkerchief, and looked as if it might have been a pistol."

"That needs to be looked after at once," said Vernet. "If they have searched his room, he must know it before he goes into the Coroner's presence again."

"Of course. But don't bring me into it. I'm going to help Dalton all I can, but for the present I can work better *incog.*"

"Dick," said Vernet quickly, "you don't think it possible that Dalton could have shot that man?"

"Why, it might be possible. I'm not prepared to believe it probable, though. Such a man as Selwyn must have made an enemy, now and then, of a different stripe from Dalton. But I'm convinced of one thing: Unless Dalton has friends to back him, he won't get fair play in *this* community."

"Yes, he will," said Vernet grimly. "I'll see that he *does*."

"And I'll back you. Here's my hand on it. Now, Van, you'd better return to Dalton, and see if anything's missing from his room. Don't stay there a great while, for some of those Regulators will be coming up soon. They mean to keep a sharp eye on him. I'll wait for you here a few minutes, but it can't be long—I'm a juryman, you know."

When Vernet was again in Dalton's room, he saw by the look upon his face that something had disturbed him.

"What is it," he asked quickly.

"I have just thought to look about me," replied Dalton, "and I believe they have been overhauling my room."

"I think so too," said Vernet. "Is anything misplaced?"

"I was about to see—" He stopped abruptly, went toward the bed, and pulled back the pillows. Then Vernet saw him start and heard him mutter: "Strange fatality!"

"Have you missed anything?"

"Yes; a small pistol that I kept under my pillow."

"Oh! Well, I was about to tell you that your room has been searched. Forewarned, forearmed, you know. Now I must leave you, for the house is full of eyes. I will see you again to-night. And remember, Dalton, you have friends at court, whatever comes."

"Vernet," said Dalton earnestly, "I don't like the idea of taking your time and thoughts away from your own affairs."

"Well, when we are once fairly embarked, won't *this* be my own affair?"

"I know you are generous enough to make it so, and I'm almost selfish enough to take you at your word."

"However you take me, you won't shake me off until things look brighter. Besides, there's Miss Wray. Of course, you don't want me to desert her?"

"No," said Dalton quickly.

"Then, perhaps, I can kill two birds with one stone. At any rate, I'll try. Now, I must go. It will soon be time to attend upon the Coroner."

"Well, old man!" said Stanhope when Vernet came back to him.

"Dick, I'm awfully glad to have you here," said Vernet.

"This don't look very cloudy for the stage robbers, does it?" queried the self-styled Podunk, seating himself on the side of the bed.

"That's a fact, my boy. But I can't let Dalton suffer. I'd see every stage between here and the Pacific robbed first."

"So would I, if you say the word, Van. I'm afraid they're going to work up a case against Dalton."

"Yes; but I don't believe he ever shot that man. If I know a gentleman, and a man of honor, Philip Dalton is one. I've seen him tried."

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if you see him tried again," said Podunk, with a grimace. "Sit down, Van; we can talk a little while."

"But you—won't they miss you from that precious jury?"

"Oh, that's all right. They are in two rooms, with a door between; if they don't see me in one, they'll think me in the other. I'll take the chances."

"Where's the Coroner?"

"Closeted with Mack and Connolley."

"And who is Connolley?"

"Captain Connolley, of the Caledonia Regulators."

"The mischief!"

"I echo your sentiments. They mean well, but they'll do more harm than good to Caledonia, if I may judge from the samples I've seen of their wisdom and prowess."

"Dick," said the other, "how did you happen to know the lay of these two rooms, and that this one was empty?"

Podunk laughed softly and shrugged his shoulder.

"The fact is," he said, "I've got a claim on this room."

"How?"

"This room," continued Podunk, "was taken yesterday by a man who came in the coach from the East. He paid a week in advance, but he's disappeared."

Vernet eyed him steadily for a moment, and then a smile crossed his face.

"I think you told them downstairs that you had been here several days," he said.

"Precisely; wouldn't do to say I came yesterday, because the only man who came by the stage was the missing fellow. He came with a couple of ladies."

"With Miss Wray?"

"Oh! so you've heard of Miss Wray?"

"Dalton told me a little."

"Dalton! Does *he* know her?"

"Yes." And Vernet recounted what Philip Dalton had just told him.

"Well," was Podunk's comment, "if things don't come around strangely! You remember old Follingsbee, the lawyer?"

"I should think so," replied Vernet, with a grimace.

"While I was in Washington, about that business of Wrexalls,—I went, you must know, just after getting your first letter—I got a line from Mr. Follingsbee, asking me to call upon him the instant I returned to the city, and I did so. He said that a client of his, Mr. Stephen Wray, in fact, was ill in Caledonia. In short, he told me all about old Wray's speculations out here—I won't bother you with the details now—but a party, who was interested with him in big mining schemes, had wired him from Omaha to come on at once. He told of his long absence; of his daughter's concern for his safety; and, finally, how she had received a letter bidding her secure a companion and come to Caledonia, as he —Wray— was too ill to travel, and could not get well without her. He had even fixed the date upon which she was to start. Follingsbee thought, at first, that he must accompany Miss Wray, for to let her travel alone was out of the question, although she was bent upon coming at any risk. Just at this crisis, and while he was almost wild over his perplexities,—for his business would go to the dogs when he left it, he was sure—he meets Ainsworth on the street, and learns from him that I contemplate a trip West, and am to set out about the time fixed for Miss Wray's departure. So he asks me plump if I will act as escort to the young lady and her companion. Of course I was delighted, and consented promptly, when, that very afternoon, along comes your second letter, in which you tell

me that the P. C. Overland Mail and Express people advise extra caution, as a rumor has got afloat among the mines and mountains that they have sent East for detectives. Then I see that it won't do to come here in *propria persone*. So I rush around to Follinsbee's office; catch him just as he is setting out to inform the young lady that she is to travel to Caledonia under the protection of Richard Stanhope, Esq., and tell him that it cannot be. As he don't know the nature of my business, but gives me credit for knowing it myself, pretty generally, he hardly understands how to arrange matters. After considerable talk, we settle it thus: He is to write the ladies, advising them that a middle aged gentleman of his acquaintance will see them safely to the end of their journey. I am to look after their comfort in the most unobtrusive manner possible; and, leaving them in the hands of Mr. Wray, vanish like a fairy godmother or something of that sort.

"But Fate has set her face against me. While I am on my way to the rendezvous, made up as a very mild and middle aged gentleman, I am intercepted; an old woman tumbles down before an omnibus, and I lose five minutes is rescuing her, and telling her which way she wants to go. I take a hack and get spilled out, owing to a collision with another omnibus. Then I am stopped at a corner by a procession, and finally arrive, get my ticket, and hear the call, 'all aboard'. I run, and I meet Follingsbee coming out of the car, looking doleful. I stop him, and have to introduce myself. He tarries, at the risk of his neck, long enough to tell me that they are on the west side of the coach, that Miss Wray is dressed in brown, and that her companion is a pink-faced girl in ribbons. There are a good many brown ladies, but the pink-faced girl in ribbons is unmistakable. I hasten to present my-

self, and do it in such a blundering fashion that I omit to give myself a name. The sight of Miss Wray pricks my conscience a little, and I regret the necessity I am under of deceiving her as to my identity—she is so lovely, so gentle-mannered, so quiet and sad. But presently I experience a revulsion of feeling, and thank Heaven that I did not appear in *propria persone*, for the pink female is loud-voiced, garrulous and overflowing with curiosity. Had she known a name by which to address me, it would have been common to every passenger in the coach before we were an hour out. It would have been trumpeted up and down the stately halls of this magnificent hostelry, instanter. I cannot converse with Miss Wray without setting her pink companion in motion, and I see that her loud talk and general lack of breeding distresses the lady. So I leave them to themselves for the most part, only coming forward when I can make myself useful."

He stops for a moment, and looks at Vernet, but that young man only says "Well?" And Podunk resumes.

"When we leave the railway and take to the stage, I ride outside; and when we arrive before this door, the ladies are very tired. I say to Miss Wray that I will find her father at once, and she waits impatiently in the parlor. Soon I am forced to come back and tell her that Mr. Wray is not in the house. And then I cheerfully volunteer to go out and look him up. Of course I advise her to go at once to her room, and of course she does not heed my advice. I must here do justice to my instincts as a detective, and say that already I was beginning to smell something 'rotten in Denmark'; and although I was disappointed, I was not much surprised, after inquiring at all the places where roomers or boarders of a decent quality are ever taken, to find that no one knew of such

a man as Stephen Wray. It was late in the evening before I had finished my rounds, and I came back dreading my interview with Miss Wray, and wishing it over. In the hall I met the pink female. She told me that Miss Wray had retired; that she had met in the parlor a gentleman from the States, who informed her that Mr. Wray was not in Caledonia; and that, after a talk with him, she had retired at once to her room, half distracted with grief. The pink damsel added that, not to disappoint *me*, she had 'waited up' to explain matters. I wanted to hear more of this gentleman from the States, but would not venture to question Miss Ribbons."

"I suppose," said Vernet thoughtfully, "that it must have been Dalton."

"Likely. Well, something had to be done, I said to myself: Mr. Wray must be found. So by way of a beginning, I determined to overhaul the town, and see what I could gather. Accordingly I got myself up as you see, and struck out."

"But how in the name of mischief did you get on that jury, and why?"

"I didn't. That was sprung on me. You see, I was at Mack's when the news of the murder came; and I went with the crowd that brought in the body. This Mountain Mag came with it. I wanted to watch her, and in trying to do so I became a little too conspicuous, and the Coroner gobbled me."

"Why were you interested in Mountain Mag?"

"Well, I thought she had something on her mind; and I guess now I was right. She didn't tell quite all she knew this morning."

"She is not the only one."

"Eh!"

"There was another witness who kept back more than she told."

"Oh! then you saw it, too?"

"Saw what?"

"Well, something not quite candid on the part of Miss Lorne."

"I thought so."

"Van," said Podunk, turning upon his friend with sudden eagerness, "what do you think of the Coroner?"

"He seems to understand his business."

"Yes, yes! but we want something more than that. We want his ear, if we find that we can trust him. We've got to introduce a lever in favor of Dalton. One or the other of us may yet have to reveal our identity to him."

Vernet remained for a few moments silent and thoughtful. Finally he said:

"We must be guided by circumstances, Dick. If they make out a case against Dalton, he must have at least one visible friend. If *I* have to come to the front, there will be all the more need for keeping *you* out of sight."

"I see," said the other, starting up. "We must separate now, Van. Where is your room?"

"On this hall, lower down."

"I have a piece of luggage here that I wish you would take possession of, as soon as you can. It's this square valise with a canvas skin."

"Very good."

"Get it, take it to your room, and remove the canvas the first thing. It will be past recognition then; and I'll manage to find it, and you, in due time."

"What are you going to do about Miss Wray, Dick? Won't

she rather expect to see her elderly traveling companion?"

"Well, I can't be in two characters at once. For the present I must be Podunk; perhaps this evening I may manage to reappear in the *role* of age and respectability. But I must get back to duty. Say—you stand pretty well with your stage-coach traveling companions—couldn't you drop a hint to my fellow juryman?"

"Of what nature?"

"I think we may want that man Monckton to appear as witness. If I drop you a hint—"

"I'll take it, Dick."

"Well, I'll manage to get a word with you between this and daylight to-morrow, until then"—

"We are strangers."

"That's the word. Open the door, and if the coast is clear, I'll rejoin that learned body below."

CHAPTER XIII.

DALTON AND THE CORONER.

Either some new idea had inspired Podunk to hasten proceedings, or he had bethought himself of a simpler method of setting the Tourist in motion, and used it to save his friend trouble, or prevent possible mistakes.

When the jury returned in solemn march to Mack's, Podunk continued to walk beside the Tourist.

"I tell ye, sir," he said admiringly, "ye made some mighty

good pints when ye put them questions to that gal. I seen the Coroner lookin' at ye, as if he thought ye'd struck somethin'. Lord, but ye brought that moon business in jest *too* easy!"

The Tourist accepted the praise, and calmly ignored the fact that his questions had been shrewdly suggested by a whispered remark from Podunk.

"It beats all nater," Podunk went on, "the idees some folks ketch onto, without half tryin'. Now there's that slim Tenderfoot what fit the stage robbers: *he* thinks he knows a thing or two."

"About what?" questioned the Tourist languidly.

"Why, when I was gittin' a drink out of the waterin'-pot behind the door in the office, he was a talkin' to the clerk. I didn't ketch the hull drift of it, cause I didn't like to listen, but I heard him say that if *he* was on that jury, he'd have that feller Munk, that Mounting Mag said she was lookin' after, put up ter testify."

"Hum!" said the Tourist absently, "I almost think it's going to rain."

Podunk said no more, but when they were mustering again in Mack's gambling room, he had the satisfaction of seeing the juror in conference with the Coroner; and the Coroner, in his turn, in conference with Connolley.

"Good!" he muttered to himself; "the bait takes."

During the noon intermission, the Coroner had mapped out for himself a line of inquiry, and he began to work vigorously. It had been the expectation of many, and the hope as well, that Philip Dalton would be the next to come under the Coroner's scrutiny; but Doctor Mitchell had planned otherwise, and a number and variety of witnesses were called, who tes-

tified to the doings and whereabouts of Selwyn during the twenty-four hours previous to his death.

At this point, and following the dismissal of his last witness, the Coroner pondered over his notes, and seemed for a time undecided. He glanced toward Philip Dalton, who was sitting in the rear of the room, and who looked, now that the crisis was at hand, grave, as befitted the occasion, but perfectly self-possessed and calm. Not far from him sat Van Vernet, wearing the look of a disinterested spectator, and exchanging an occasional word with the person nearest him, who happened to be our old man of the Theatre, Pop. But he did not so much as glance toward Dalton, who, in his turn, seemed equally unaware of the others nearness.

"James Waddell will take the stand," said the Coroner finally.

James Waddell came promptly forward. He was a thin, red-visaged young man, with a shock of light hair, and a scant yellow moustache.

In answer to the usual interrogations, he said that he was a resident of Caledonia, and "partner in the Gold Horn", a saloon at the south end of the town. He had been in one of the boxes of the Theatre on the night previous, and had overheard a quarrel between Duke Selwyn and Philip Dalton.

There was a stir among the listeners, indicative of a growing interest.

"Mr. Waddell," said the Coroner gravely, "will you tell us, in your own way, how you came to be a listener, and what you heard?"

Mr. Waddell bowed, and began his narrative.

"I came late last night," he said, "and asked for a box first thing. I noticed when I came in that there was a party in

the next box, but they were very quiet and I did not pay much attention to what was doing around me. After a time Aileen Lorne came on the stage, and began to sing. When the song ended, the Marony boys came out with their tumbling act. The fiddles were playing soft, and I could hear loud words in the next box. I knew Selwyn's voice, and he was saying, 'I'm not the man to turn back, and you have no right to interfere.' 'I'll take the right,' the other said; 'your course is infamous.' I couldn't hear every word—sometimes I lost a whole sentence—but the next thing I heard Selwyn say was: 'Then you are going to let this business make us enemies?' Dalton answered: 'I'm going to compel you to stop.' I couldn't catch the rest of the sentence, but I heard Selwyn say tauntingly, 'How?' And then the other said something about 'this very night.' Whatever it was, it made Selwyn laugh, and he said something about *rashness*. The fiddles struck up louder just here, and I couldn't catch the words any more; but the talk seemed to grow hotter, until all at once the music lulled, and I heard these words, 'To-night will be your last. To-morrow it will be out of your power—' There the music broke in again, and in a moment I heard the door close with a bang, and it was still in the box. Afterward I heard Selwyn ask for Miss Lorne. When Miss Lorne came, she brought Rose Clarke with her. They were very quiet, and Rose seemed to do most of the talking. No; I didn't *see* Selwyn in the box. I didn't see him afterward.'

When the witness had finished, the Coroner called sharply for Philip Dalton.

Dalton had heard the testimony of Waddell with perfect composure; and he now arose, and came forward as calmly as if he were entering the dining room of the St. Charles. If he

felt the unpleasantness of his position, or realized its danger, the men crowding about, who had already more than half condemned him, would never read it in his countenance, or hear it in the tones of his voice. He was face to face with the inevitable, and he would not be conquered by it.

"Mr. Dalton," began the Coroner, "you have heard the testimony of this last witness?" Dalton bowed gravely. "Have you anything to say of a contradictory nature?"

"Nothing."

"Then you admit that you had a difference with Mr. Selwyn in box 19, last night?"

"I admit it."

"And you used the language quoted by the witness?"

"It is very probable."

"Mr. Dalton, are you willing to enlighten us further as to the nature of your quarrel with Mr. Selwyn?"

"By no means. You have made it plain to me that I am under suspicion. Upon that ground, I decline to enter into details."

"May you not be able to say something that will throw light upon this subject, and at the same time tend to exonerate yourself?"

"I shall say nothing concerning my difference with Mr. Selwyn."

"But you admit the 'difference'?"

"I have already admitted it."

"And that you used, in addressing him, the language imputed to you by the last witness?"

"I neither admit nor deny. I do not recall the precise words used by me. I presume your witness heard all that he has related."

"Mr. Dalton, where did you go upon leaving box 19?"

"To another box—number 22, I think."

"Were you alone?"

"At first—yes. Afterward, I talked with Miss Lorne for about five minutes. Then I bade her good night, and said that I was in a dull mood, and was going home."

"Did you not tell Miss Lorne that you had quarreled with Selwyn?"

"Certainly not."

The Coroner thrust a hand deep down into a pocket of his coat, and drawing out a small pistol, ivory handled and silver mounted, presented it to Dalton.

"Is that your pistol?" he asked quietly.

Dalton took the weapon and turned it over in his hand.

"It looks like one that I own," he said.

"Do you own more than one?"

"No; I never owned its mate."

"Then it has a mate?"

"I suppose so. These weapons are usually made in couples, I believe."

"But why, in purchasing this pistol then, did you not secure its fellow?"

"Doctor, you are presuming the weapon to be mine."

"Is it not yours?"

"If I had lost my pistol, I should say that this were it. But unless some person has been so premature as to enter my room, in my absence, and bring away my property, I cannot claim this weapon."

The Coroner, looking slightly annoyed, reached out his hand for the weapon, and Dalton returned it to him with a bow.

"Perhaps," said the Coroner, drawing another pistol from another pocket, "perhaps *this* is yours?"

Again Dalton took the weapon, and this time a startled look crossed his face. But he recovered himself almost immediately, and again turned the pistol about in his hand. It was apparently a *fac simile* of the first, but unlike in that it was encrusted with yellow clay.

"It appears to match the other," he said, still examining the pistol, "but I cannot venture to claim it since there seems to be so many of this peculiar pattern and workmanship."

"The other pistol, you perhaps observed, was loaded," said the Coroner. "And this is empty. Mr. Dalton, in what condition did you leave *your* pistol?"

"The one resembling this?"

"Yes."

"If you mean, was it loaded? it was."

"When you left the Theatre last night, where did you go?"

"To my hotel."

"Did you see, or converse, with any one?"

"I saw the night clerk behind the desk, as I crossed the office. I did not converse with him, or with any one."

"Did you retire at once?"

"Not immediately."

'What did you do?"

"I went directly to my room, and after a time wrote some letters."

"Have you posted those letters?"

"No, I have destroyed them."

"And why?"

"Because I had reconsidered matters, and determined not to send them."

"At what time, after writing your letter, did you leave your room last night?"

"After writing, I retired. I did not leave my room."

"Did you remain all night in your room?"

"I did."

"At what hour did you retire?"

"It was near midnight, I should judge."

"When you were in the Theatre last night, were you armed?"

"I was."

"Is it your custom to carry weapons?"

"Not in general; when I came to Caledonia, I adopted the custom of the country."

"Then why, in leaving the hotel this morning, did you ignore that custom, and leave your weapon behind?"

"I did not."

"Eh?"

"If I were to walk the streets of Caledonia considering myself armed and yet carrying only that small single-barreled toy, I should indeed deserve the title sometimes bestowed upon the unsophisticated Eastern traveller. A man can't be said to be *armed* with only one shot in his belt."

There was a little stir, and sundry glances of approbation were exchanged. Dalton's last speech had made a favorable impression upon the natives.

"And yet," said the Coroner sharply, "you left this same 'toy' under your pillow, presumably as a weapon of defense."

"True; for years it was the only weapon in my possession. During my long residence in hotels and furnished rooms in the east, I had formed the habit of sleeping with the pistol under my pillow. I considered it ample protection. When I came to Rome, I armed myself after the manner of the

Romans; but I continued the habit of sleeping with the little pistol under my head."

"Then if you were going about at night, you would not consider yourself armed, with only this pistol?"

"Decidedly not."

"How were you armed last night at the Theatre?"

"With a six shooter, in my pistol pocket."

"Are you thus armed now?"

"I am."

"Will you let me see the weapon?"

Dalton drew his pistol, and presented it to the Coroner, who took it and examined it narrowly.

"May I retain this weapon, Mr. Dalton?"

"No, sir. You have no right to do so; there is no law in force against carrying firearms here."

"But, under the circumstances—"

"I may be under suspicion, sir; I am not under arrest." He extended his hand, and after a moment's hesitation the revolver was returned.

Again the Coroner consulted his memoranda, and then he asked:

"How long have you known Mr. Selwyn?"

"I first knew Marmaduke Selwyn eight years ago. We were fellow students; we left school together, and saw considerable of each other the following winter in New York."

"And were you friends during that time?"

"Very good friends."

"How long did this continue?"

"I went abroad within the year, and we did not thereafter meet until last winter—again in New York."

"Under what circumstances?"

"We met as old acquaintances, but saw comparatively little of each other until I came West."

"And what induced you to come West?"

"A variety of motives. I was recovering from a fever, contracted during a journey to the Southern states, and my physician advised me to try pioneer life, and mountain air. Besides, I wanted to see the country, and learn something about mountain mining—I am interested in mineralogy and metals—and, lastly, Selwyn's representations had led me to think there was a chance here for profitable investments."

"I see. Did any correspondence pass between Selwyn and yourself?"

"One or two business letters only. Selwyn, after returning here from his last trip East, wrote to inform me of the business chances, and advised me to come out."

"During your stay here you two have seemed great friends, and been much together. Have you at times disagreed, as you did last night?"

"No. The affair of last night was our first and only rupture."

"Have you any reason for thinking Selwyn had an enemy here?"

"None whatever. I believe Mr. Selwyn to have been popular with nearly all classes—phenomenally so."

"Mr. Dalton, this examination has not been all that I could wish, and I shall take the liberty of questioning you again; for the present, you are dismissed."

Dalton bowed and quietly returned to his seat, so far as the eye could judge the most collected and untroubled man in the room.

The examination had been anything but satisfactory to many there present. To those who knew that the mud-encrusted

pistol had been found in the cellar, near the body of the murdered man—and these comprised the greater part of the crowd—the coolness of Dalton, and the incomprehensible reticence of the Coroner, were disappointing and mysterious. They had looked to see Dalton confronted with the announcement that the mud-spotted pistol, the companion to the one which they all believed to be his own, had been the death-dealing weapon. And they had expected to see it work a change in the demeanor of the suspected man. Connolley and Mack openly showed their displeasure.

As for the two detectives, the one a juryman and the other sitting among the spectators, the episode of the two pistols had startled both. They could not grasp the new situation, nor guess to what it would lead. That the first pistol was actually Dalton's, taken from his room, they felt tolerably sure. It was a weapon of unique workmanship, not at all likely to have many duplicates; and that its *fac simile* should have been found so near the body of Selwyn was sufficient to cause one of them great uneasiness.

While the Coroner again consulted his memoranda, and the crowd began to stir restlessly and exchange sharp whispers, there seemed to be more than the usual movement about the outer doorway; and the heads of those nearest were turned to gaze curiously at some one or something upon the threshold.

The Coroner also raised his head and turned his eyes in that direction. Just at that moment a tall Regulator, who had been posted by Connolley as a sort of guard at the entrance, came pushing his way through the crowd, and with a broad grin upon his countenance presented to the Coroner an oblong pink card, gilt edged and bearing upon its surface in huge gilt letters this name: MISS ROSABELLA SAINT LEGER.

The Coroner took the pink card, read the name, frowned mightily, and then noted in the corner the penciled word "over", strongly emphasized by two black marks underneath. Over, accordingly, he turned the card, and read on the side thus presented these high sounding and melodramatic words, none too well written, in a fine cramped hand:

"HONURED SIR. *If you wil but permit me to appeer before you, and wil grashusly receave my testamony, you may hear of something to your advantaig concurning the misteraous murder of last eave.* ROSABELLA S. L."

In spite of the absurdity of the message the Coroner's frown deepened, and changed to a look of perplexity. For a moment he hesitated, then turned and said to the jury:

"A new witness has volunteered something in the way of testimony. I think we must hear her." Then to the Regulator who had presented the card: "Bring forward the—person."

CHAPTER XIV.

A VOLUNTEER WITNESS.

In another moment, "Miss Rosabella Saint Leger" was courtesying before him; and she was none other than our former acquaintance, and Barbara Wray's late companion, Susan Collins.

She was pinker than ever, and the ribbons by which Stanhope had identified her, were in profusion and all a-flutter.

Her attire was brilliant, and truly wonderful in its complication of arrangement and its variety of color. Evidently, Miss Collins, or Rosabella Saint Leger, was bent upon conquest, and fully expected to create a sensation. Before the inquiry was over she had succeeded in her undertaking, in more senses than one.

For a moment the Coroner scrutinized her attentively, and then said, somewhat impatiently;

"You call yourself Miss Saint Leger, do you?"

Miss Saint Leger bowed and smiled blandly. Evidently she had slept in curl papers, for her head was now covered with bright hued ringlets, many in number and enormous in size, and every motion set them bobbing and swaying.

"I do," she answered, with a little, affected lisp; "Mith Rothabella Thaint Leger."

"What do you know about this murder, Miss?"

The volunteer witness bridled and tossed back her curls. She had her own ideas concerning the duties of a witness, and evidently had rehearsed her story.

"I came," she began, "from New York, and arrived in Caledonia yesterday. I traveled in company with a young lady who was coming to this western town, *she said*, to meet her father. We traveled all the way in company, and of course I thupposed a nice old gentleman would meet us at the hotel steps. If I hadn't thupposed so, I shouldn't never have come with her."

"Young woman, you came here to testify about this murder, didn't you?" said the Coroner testily.

"Yeth, thir. I am coming to that, only I thought I ought to explain my position."

"Well, don't waste words."

"When we arrived at the St. Charles Hotel," went on the witness, withdrawing her eyes from the unsympathetic countenance of the Coroner, and letting them rove from face to face among her auditors, as if in search of a more congenial spirit, "there wath no one to meet Miss Wray, if that ith really her name. There wathn't a soul that she knew, until last evening"—Miss Saint Leger did not attend closely to her lisp,—"and then we was in the parlor. I was looking out of the window, and she was walking up and down the floor. The parlor door was open, and all at once I heard some one say, Miss Wray, is it possible! And I turned around, and there was a splendid-lookin' gentleman standin' in the door. I s'pose he was going through the hall after supper. I don't s'pose there could have been any appointment between them—"

"You may spare us your suppositions," broke in the Coroner. "Tell only what you *know*."

"Well, there he *wath;* and he held out his hand to Miss Wray, and seemed mightily pleased to see her. And she almost screamed out: '*Mr. Selwyn!*' and was going on to say more, when she noticed he was looking at *me*, and she turned around short and ordered me out of the room. I ain't one of the kind to stay where I ain't wanted, and I went, although the gentleman murmured something about its being unnecessary, in a very polite manner."

"Stop; you are sure that the lady called him Selwyn?"

"Oh, my! yes."

"Did you ever see Mr. Selwyn?"

"Why, I saw him *then!*"

"Describe him."

"He was tall, and blonde, and he had a diamond ring on his finger."

"How long did Selwyn and the lady converse?"

"Oh, half an hour, I should think."

"Do you know anything about their conversation?"

Miss Saint Leger bridled and fluttered her curls.

"Well, I didn't want to go off up stairs alone, so I walked about in the hall; and when I passed the parlor door I could hear enough to be sure they was quarreling, or at least she was. He seemed to be sort of pleading like. And once, when a man was coming up the hall, and I stepped back close to the parlor door to let him pass, and sort of made believe I was going in, for I was awful afraid he'd speak to me, I heard Miss Wray say: '*It would be a relief even to know you were dead!*' Just then something made a noise below, and the next words I caught seemed to be in answer to something he had said; 'You shall not,' she was saying; 'I am not so utterly alone. There is at least one man here whom I can trust. You shall explain to him—soon—to-night, and—' I didn't hear the last word, for of course I wouldn't *listen*."

"No; *of course not*," echoed the Coroner contemptuously. "Are you now staying at the St. Charles, Miss?"

At this moment his attention was arrested by the movement of a man who had slowly made his way from his place among the spectators, and now stood very near the witness, and almost behind her. It was Van Vernet, and his straight, well-clad form, among the rough-garbed, stolid men about him, was sufficiently striking to have at once attracted the attention of the Coroner, even if he had not hailed him by that almost imperceptible sign.

When the newly-fledged Miss Saint Leger made her way to the front, Van Vernet had turned his eye for one moment toward Philip Dalton, and had read in his face the first sign of

uneasiness. Turning next a momentary glance toward Stanhope, he saw that he, too, was not pleased at the sight of the pink-faced witness. And then the thought flashed upon his mind that this could be no other than "Miss Ribbons", the companion of Miss Wray.

At the first mention of Barbara Wray, the anxiety in Dalton's face deepened; and Podunk shot Vernet a glance which he readily interpreted as a danger signal. And when the name of Duke Selwyn was brought forward, his mind was again illuminated. The man with whom Miss Wray had conversed before retiring last night, was not Dalton, as he had supposed, but Selwyn. He remembered perfectly now. Dalton had said that he saw Miss Wray in the morning, and for only ten minutes. Then he arose from his place, and began to make his way toward the Coroner. He had resolved to act, and was inwardly rejoiced that his first experiment had been a success. He had secured to himself the attention of the Coroner, which was all that he desired for the time.

When he had exchanged quick glances with the stranger, the Coroner again turned toward the witness.

"What was your motive in coming here to-day?" he asked abruptly.

The girl started and looked surprised at the question. "I thought it was my duty, thir," she said, after a moment's hesitation.

"Did you inform Miss Wray of your intentions?"

"No, thir. I was afraid it would have a bad effect upon her."

"And for what reason?"

"Why, when I heard, this morning, that Mr. Selwyn had been shot, and rushed into the parlor to tell her the news, as one naturally would, she—fainted."

Again Vernet's eyes went quickly to Dalton's face, and he read there a corroboration of this surprising statement.

At that instant the witness suddenly pointed to Dalton.

"That man," she said, "was talking with her when she fainted; ask him."

The Coroner turned quickly toward Dalton

"Is that true?" he asked.

"I met Miss Wray near the door of the parlor, this morning," replied Dalton. "I was greatly surprised to see her. Miss Wray is a lady of delicacy and refinement, and the daughter of a wealthy New Yorker. She told me that her father came to this place three months ago; that she had ceased to hear from him and became greatly alarmed concerning him. Lately she received a letter, which she supposed was written by him, and which bade her procure a companion and join him here. She engaged that person"—here he pointed, in his turn, at Miss Saint Leger—" and reached Caledonia yesterday, only to learn that her father was not to be found. She had told me this much, and was deeply agitated, as was but natural, when that young woman rushed in and cried out that some one had been murdered. Miss Wray's faint was caused by her anxiety concerning her father, and by her fatigued state, rather than by the young woman's wild words. A little later, when I went up from the office to the parlor to ask after Miss Wray, that young woman was caught with her ear to the key hole. She is a spy, and I believe her capable of falsehood. Miss Wray, no doubt, has dismissed her, and she takes this method of revenging herself."

"It's no such thing!" said the irate damsel. "Much *I* care what *he* had to say to her!"

"Hold your tongue, Miss," said the Coroner sternly.

For the first time during the examination Coroner Mitchell was really at a loss; undecided how to act. Not that he allowed his indecision to manifest itself in his countenance; on the contrary he put on a most forbidding frown, and appeared to be arranging his notes, while in reality he was marshalling his ideas. He had no prejudice against Philip Dalton, but he knew his constituency, and that they would brook nothing that looked like favoritism, or sympathy, unpopularly bestowed. He strictly fulfilled, in his public character, all the requirements of Caledonia, generally managing to have his own way in the end, and solacing himself always by holding, for his own private benefit, deeply rooted and very decided private opinions. If he wished to create a prejudice against Philp Dalton, he knew that an attempt to favor him by feebly following up the evidence was the surest way to do it. And he knew, equally well, that rough handling on his part was likely to turn the tide of sympathy in Dalton's favor.

He realized now, as well as if they had put it into words, that the crowd about him expected him to produce Miss Wray; and that to disappoint them would be to render that young lady an object of suspicion, and to cause her, perhaps, serious annoyance. He thought of all this, and his decision was made. Looking up, his eyes encountered those of Vernet, and he said:

"Is there any one present who knows Miss Wray, and who will take a message to her?"

Instantly Vernet came forward.

"I will wait upon the lady," he said.

The Coroner tore a leaf from his note-book and wrote some words upon it.

"Take this," he said; and as Vernet extended his hand, another glance of intelligence was exchanged.

When Vernet was outside the building, he quickened his pace, and hurried on with the folded paper in his hand, until he came to the corner which he must turn to reach the hotel. Here he looked back, and being assured that he was not followed, nor observed, quickly unfolded the bit of paper and read these words:

"If you can convince these people that the lady is too ill to appear to-day, I will postpone further proceedings until to-morrow."

Vernet's eyes lighted up, and he smiled as he hurried toward the St. Charles. Rightly thinking that her anxiety must render Miss Wray too restless to remain quietly in her room, Vernet passed the office, which was deserted, save for the presence of Charlie, and hurried up the stairs. The parlor door was closed, and he opened it softly; so softly, indeed, that the sound did not reach the ear of the lady who sat in a low chair near the window, with her head bowed upon the table beside her.

"Miss Wray."

She started, lifted her head, and then rose quickly. As quickly Van Vernet stepped across the threshold and closed the door. For a moment they regarded each other in silence —the woman all that is lovely, gracious, refined in womanhood; the man a perfect specimen of manly grace and vigor.

Barbara recognized at once the hero of the morning; and Van Vernet mentally assured himself that hers was the loveliest face he had ever seen.

"I did not mean to startle you, Miss Wray," he said, com-

ing toward her and speaking in a low tone. "I have brought you a message from Mr. Dalton."

"From Mr. Dalton!"

"Yes. We are old friends, and, as you perhaps know, he is at present in a little trouble, which, I think, will be but temporary."

"I know—he has told me."

"Oh! then you will understand what I am about to say. Mr. Dalton has been on the witness stand this afternoon, and some unpleasant bits of circumstantial evidence have been brought forward against him. Fearing that for a few days he might not be in a position to render you much service, he thought it best to tell me of your presence here, and the nature of your trouble. It is at his request that I offer my services, and it is my own earnest wish that you accept them."

In the eyes of a woman, especially such a woman as Barbara Wray, a deed of valor is a patent of nobility; and to Barbara, his defense of the stage-coach seemed a most valorous deed. It never occurred to her to doubt his sincerity—there was too much respectful sympathy in his eye, his attitude, and the tones of his voice; and she had never learned to distrust her fellow mortals.

"I am not in a position to refuse your kindness," she said simply. "Will you tell me to whom I am indebted?"

Vernet smiled, and then looked grave.

"To any but a lady, Miss Wray, I should feel justified in introducing myself by a name not my own, as my business here is of a private nature, and there are strong reasons why I should conceal my identity. My name is Vernet."

Her eye brightened, and she took a step forward.

"Vernet," she said; "not—surely not Van Vernet, the brave detective?"

"Perhaps not quite that; but Van Vernet and a detective I certainly am."

"Oh!" she cried, her countenance brightening, "I might have known it! I have heard you described. One could hardly live in New York without hearing of you, and your friend, Stanhope. And Mr. Dalton has sent *you* to me! Oh, how I thank him!"

"So do I," said Vernet gallantly. "And now, Miss Wray, time presses. Will you trust me for a few hours, without requiring too many explanations?"

"Yes; oh, yes!"

"Then, believe me, I am going to devote myself to the task of finding your father, and of extricating Dalton from his present difficulties. To begin, I ask you to go to your room, and ring at once for a servant—fortunately this modern edifice has the convenience of the worst assortment of tinkling bells that I ever heard. When some one comes—which will be in half an hour, probably—say that you are indisposed, and ask that a doctor be called at once. There is but one doctor in town, and he is the Coroner."

"Oh!" she exclaimed; "but why do this?"

"I will explain. You had a companion when you arrived here, whom you have dismissed. And yesterday you met and talked with some one in this room—some one other than Philip Dalton."

"Yes," she said hesitatingly.

"Well, this malicious young woman has just appeared before the Coroner, and declared that this man was Duke Selwyn; and so, of course, it becomes the duty of the Coroner to summon you to appear before him."

"*I* appear before the Coroner? Oh, I cannot?"

"Miss Wray," said Vernet gravely, "I think I had better tell you that the person who was your companion, has said that you *quarreled* with Selwyn. As you must be aware, this is a wild community, ruled by impulse rather than by law and justice; and the popular sentiment, after hearing this miserable woman's story, is against you."

"Against *me!*" Miss Wray drew herself up proudly.

"I think," went on Vernet, "that the Coroner is a kindly-disposed person; that he means to be just. Here is the note which he gave me, when I volunteered, upon his call for a messenger, to come to you."

He put the note into her hand, and she read it slowly, once and again.

"Mr. Vernet," she said, "does this mean that I must appear before the Coroner, if not to-day, to-morrow?"

"I fear so."

"And what does he wish to hear from my lips?"

"Your version of your interview with Selwyn, if there was such interview; and I had ventured to hope that if you must go among those people, you might say something that would be of benefit to Mr. Dalton."

She looked up quickly.

"Could I say anything that would benefit him?"

"If you could say that you knew him to be a gentleman above reproach, and believed him incapable of a bloody or base deed, it might be something."

"I could say that, and more."

"I think I should tell you—for very slight things weigh with these sensation-hungry people—that your late companion has ventured to intimate that you may not be so much interested in finding your father as in seeing some one else."

"Stop!" she said sharply. "I know the woman now, and I think that I understand." Her head was proudly lifted, and there was a new firmness about her lips. "What do you advise?" she said.

"It was my first impression that you would be too much startled to think of going before those people now—that you might not have the courage—that you needed time to collect your thoughts. I believe that was the Coroner's idea, too."

"And now you think otherwise?"

"I think that I understand your courage, and spirit."

"And do you advise me to go now?"

"It is not *necessary* that you should. You have until to-morrow. By sending for Doctor Mitchell, as I have suggested, you would have an opportunity to tell him your story, and by so doing your ordeal will be less trying, perhaps, to-morrow."

"And by so doing, too, I shall give these people, already prejudiced against me, the chance to say, and think, that I was forewarned; that I have *prepared* my story. Is it not so?"

"Yes; that might happen."

"Is there any reason, then, why you advise me to wait, other than that I may have time to gain courage, and grow accustomed to the thought of the disagreeable task?"

"Only this: There was a second person who came here in your company; and that woman quoted some words which, she alleges, you addressed to Selwyn. Her object seemed to be a desire to create, in the minds of some of her hearers, an impression against you; an idea that this man—who, by the way, cannot be found—may have been merely your tool; and that he—"

"I see!" she cried; "I understand perfectly. Oh, this is

infamous! That girl will say that I came here to meet Marmaduke Selwyn; that I quarreled with him, threatened him; that the stranger was my tool, and that I—incited him—to murder!"

"She has not gone so far as that yet, but I think she has given sufficient proof of what was in her mind."

"Then she must not have the opportunity to further malign me. Come, Mr. Vernet, I am going to let the Coroner and the Caledonians hear what *I* have to say of Marmaduke Selwyn and Philip Dalton."

"But, Miss Wray, you will be cautious? You will say no more than is necessary?"

"I will say no more than is *true*. Wait here, Mr. Vernet; I will join you in one moment."

She crossed the room with a quick, firm step, and went out, a crimson flush in either fair cheek, and a bright, purposeful gleam in her brown eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

BARBARA AT "COURT."

During Vernet's absence, the Coroner, too wise to permit the assembled crowd to relapse into disorder, or turn their attention upon each other, began slowly to cross-question Miss Rosabella Saint Leger—not with the hope of gaining fresh information, but simply to keep the attention of his audience.

He gained from her a garbled description of the dress and appearance of Duke Selwyn, and trapped her into an admis-

sion that she had listened at the door. Then, to gain more time, he made a pretence of note-taking, and afterwards held an animated dialogue with Mack and Connolley—in which, on the part of all three, there was much earnestness, and no pretence whatever.

This discussion was broken in upon by the appearance of Vernet and Miss Wray. And strangely out of place they looked, as he led her, her hand resting upon his arm, through that motley crowd. A passage way was promptly opened for them; and the Coroner after one glance, arose to receive the lady, while Mack himself hastened to place for her a chair.

Fortunately for her comfort and composure, he so placed it that her back was toward the long table where Duke Selwyn's body still lay outstretched, covered, now, with a dark pall-like cloth. In passing the line of eager staring men, she had kept her eyes downcast, and she did not know that death, in its most ghastly form, was so near her.

When he had placed her in the chair, Vernet, keeping his station at her side, said to the Coroner:

"I found Miss Wray more than willing to come, sir, and she only asks that you will be as brief as possible, and spare her any unnecessary effort. She is, as you must see, much worn with anxiety and fatigue."

The Coroner bowed; and Mack observing that the stranger evidently meant to stand his ground, motioned to some one on the outer edge of the aisle, and a chair, passed over the heads of the witnesses, was placed at Vernet's disposal. He took it, with admirable *sang froid*, bowed his thanks to Mack, who was inwardly wondering what interest he could have in this affair, and depositing it beside that occupied by Miss Wray, coolly seated himself.

"If Miss Wray is ready," said the Coroner, giving no sign that he was inwardly delighted with the *nonchalance* of the young and prepossessing stranger, "we will proceed."

"I am ready, sir," answered the lady, in a low musical voice, and fixing her dark eyes, now quite calm and steady, upon his face.

"I will begin by asking you if you know that young woman?" said Coroner Mitchell, pointing a long fore-finger at Miss Saint Leger, who, by his direction, was seated near, and directly under his eye.

Miss Wray cast one glance upon the girl, who flushed and shook her ringlets, and then her eyes returned to the Coroner's face.

"I do," she said quietly.

"Who is she?"

"She introduced herself to me as a Miss Susan Collins."

"Under what circumstances?"

"I had advertised for a traveling companion, and she answered the advertisement."

"Then she did not introduce herself to you as Miss Rosabella Saint Leger?"

"Certainly not."

"Miss Wray, do you know what that young woman has been telling myself and this jury?"

"Something concerning an interview with Mr. Selwyn, I understand."

"Yes. Then you knew Marmaduke Selwyn?"

"I did."

"Will you tell us what passed between yourself and Mr. Selwyn last night?"

"Willingly; but to make it clear, I must first tell what brought me to this place."

"Do so."

In her low clear voice, and in the graceful simple manner so natural to her, Barbara Wray told her story. Told how Marmaduke Selwyn had appeared in New York, during the previous winter; and how, in some manner unknown to herself, he had made the acquaintance of her father. How, gradually, he became a visitor at their house, and interested Mr. Wray in his schemes of mining and land speculations among the mountains and valleys of the West. She told how, when Selwyn set out for the West, her father had empowered him to make certain purchases and investments in his interest, and had given a half promise to visit the mining country. And, finally, how, after receiving two or three urgent letters from Selwyn—representing their prospective gains as promising to be enormous, and the business such as needed the personal supervision of Mr. Wray, and, at last, a telegram more flattering and urgent than either, sent from the railway terminus by Selwyn, who had made the journey thus far East for that sole purpose—Mr. Wray had decided to visit Caledonia. At this point in her narrative, the young lady ceased speaking, her voice was tremulous and her lip quivered.

After a moment's silence, the Coroner resumed the inquiry.

"And your father set out for this place alone, Miss Wray?"

"He did."

"You can, if it becomes necessary, name the precise day and date?"

"I can."

Here Vernet shot him a quick glance of approval; his good opinion of Coroner Mitchell was rapidly growing. That he

had not asked then and there, in the presence of all Caledonia, the precise day when the missing man left his home, he considered, on the part of the Coroner, almost a stroke of genius.

"And have you—" the Coroner checked himself quickly and changed the form of the question. "And did you hear from Mr. Wray after he left New York?"

"Yes. I received three or four letters, all written within less than two weeks after his arrival in Caledonia; and then another, the fifth, I think—which told me he was about to set out, by the stage, for Rockville."

"And when did you hear from him again?"

"I—I did not hear from him again, until I received the letter which told me that he was here in Caledonia, too ill to travel further, and begged that I would come to him."

"Miss Wray, did not your father, in asking you to come to him, suggest the propriety of some escort other than this young person here?"

"My father's letter," she replied sadly, "bore evidences of having been written with difficulty; he said only that which must be said; and he, no doubt, trusted to my judgment, and that of our friends. Our family lawyer is a Mr. Follingsbee, and in a postscript my father had written: "Let Follingsbee arrange for your safe and comfortable journey."

"And did this gentleman, your lawyer, permit you to set out on such a journey *alone?*" At the word "alone", Miss Saint Leger sniffed and tossed her curls.

"By no means; Mr. Follingsbee at first intended to come with me, but he found that this would be almost impossible. At the last moment, for I was determined to go even if I went alone, he learned that a gentleman, an acquaintance, was traveling West; and he wrote to tell me that, as it seemed he

could do no better, he would place us in the care of this gentleman. At the hour of our departure, Mr. Follingsbee appeared at our house, and accompanied us to the railway station. He said that his friend, who had been detained by business, would meet us there."

"And did he?"

"Yes; at the last moment. The train was about to start, and Mr. Follingsbee was leaving us in despair, when they met as one was quitting, the other entering, the coach. Mr. Follingsbee had only time to tell him that we were in the coach, and he sought us out at once."

"Where is this gentleman now?"

"I do not know," she replied; and then told how he had gone out to search for her father, and how, in the morning, she had learned from the clerk that the stranger was not to be found.

"At what hour did you see him last?"

"It was dark, or almost dark, when the stage arrived. The gentleman left us in the parlor soon after, and went to make inquiries for me. It was soon after this, and while I was walking about the parlor half distracted between fear and suspense, that Mr. Selwyn, in passing, saw me and came in."

"Oh, and will you tell us, Miss Wray, just what was said by Mr. Selwyn and yourself?"

"I hardly know. Think of my position, sir. I was half crazed with anxiety; and suddenly the man through whose influence my father came to this place only to disappear so strangely, was before me. I remember that my first words were a demand to know where my father was." She paused a moment, and seemed thinking. "Yes," she said, "I remember. He did not reply, but looked, instead, at Miss Collins.

In my excitement I interpreted his glance as meaning that he did not desire her presence, and I asked her to leave the room. I anticipated—I hardly know what."

"Did Selwyn proffer his hand, and did you refuse to take it?"

"I do not recollect—it is probable. I was not thinking of ceremonies. He may have proffered his hand; if so, I am sure I did not extend mine. I only looked him in the face, and asked again for news of my father."

"And he?"

"He appeared to be astonished at my question, and said that he did not know that Mr. Wray was in the Western world. He made an attempt to explain—to tell me about some letters; but I would not listen. It was he who had prevailed upon my father to meet him here; I could think of nothing else. I accused him of treachery; of intentional wrong. I said he could find my father if he would; that he knew my father brought with him a large sum of money; and I don't know how much more. I believed, in the frenzy of the moment, that he had concocted some scheme to enrich himself by robbery, detention, or in some way that I could not explain."

"And what did he say to this?"

"What could he say, but deny, remonstrate, and finally leave me, remarking that he would try to talk with me again, when I was calmer."

"Miss Wray, did you make use of any such words as these: 'It would be a relief even to know that you were dead?'"

"I?" She started, and then almost smiled. "I remember," she said; "I spoke of my father, and I used some such words, but I did not use the pronoun *you*."

"I see," said the Coroner dryly, casting a contemptuous

glance toward Miss Rosabella Saint Leger. "And later," he resumed, "did you say something about one 'person whom you could trust,' and who should see him, call him to account, even that night?"

"Yes. I think I said something like that."

"May I ask to whom you referred?"

"I referred to the gentleman who was our escort. I relied upon the promise given by Mr. Follingsbee that I should find him in every way trustworthy, and ready to serve me."

"Do you know the nature of his business in Caledonia?"

"I do not."

Van Vernet stirred uneasily. He dreaded the next question, for he feared that it would reveal the fact that Miss Wray was ignorant of the name of her escort. But at that moment there occurred a lucky diversion.

An anxious-faced, mud-bespattered Regulator pushed his way through the crowd, and beckoned to Connolley. And Connolley, after a moment's whispered conversation, came back with darkening visage, and whispered in his turn to the Coroner.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WITNESS WANTED.

It was late, for the time occupied in the examination of the witnesses had occupied all of the earlier afternoon hours; and after a few moment's conference with Connolley, the Coroner turned, advanced a step so that he stood close beside Vernet, and then, without seeming to notice his nearness to the latter,

bent forward and addressed himself, in a low tone to Mack.

"There's an important witness missing," he said with the decided air of a man not to be turned from his purpose, and who knows more than he chooses to tell. "There's skulduggery afoot somewhere, and this jury's going to get to the inside of it before they give in a verdict. You'd better make your announcement now; I'm going to adjourn."

"But," began Mack in the same cautious tone, "it won't do Doc'—"

"It *shall* do!" The Coroner's face was black with rising wrath, and his eyes flashed a look into those of the remonstrator that served to silence him. "Don't make a mistake, Mack. Say your say, and do your best to keep the town quiet to-night, or you may regret it." Then he turned once more toward the crowd.

"My friends, Mack and Connolley have a word to say, I believe."

He spoke crisply, and with a frown upon his face, which caused some one near Podunk to whisper to his neighbor: "Something's happened; Old Mitchell's badly riled."

Having made his announcement, Coroner Mitchell stepped back, and Mack arose, rubbing one huge hand over the top of a very bald head, and looking uneasy.

"I want to remark," he began, "that this place, in all its departments, will be closed to-night. The body of Mr. Selwyn will be laid out in my Theatre, and unless further developments make a change in our programme, the funeral will be held here; the time will be made known to-morrow. There will be no liquors sold at this bar, and I particularly request that there'll be no noise about this place, and no crowd outside. The doors will be closed immediately."

Mack's speech created a marked sensation; but no sooner had he ceased than Connolley stepped into view, and the audience was instantly hushed.

"Gentlemen," began Connolley, "I want to say to ye that it will be decent and right to keep an orderly town to-night; and I want the Regulators to be on hand here, as soon as the place is cleared o' this aujence; and if there's a dozen good citizens that are willin' to act with us in tryin' to keep peace and quiet to-night, we'd like to have *them* stop too. But we don't want no crowd, and we ain't got no explanation to make to anybody."

Connolley, in his turn, stepped back, and then the tall form of the Coroner confronted audience and jury by turns.

"Citizens of Caledonia," he said, "and gentlemen of the jury, we have reached a point in our investigation where we must crave your patience, and exert our own. I have learned during the day that there is another witness, and I think an important one, to be heard before we shall dare attempt to pronounce upon this case. The testimony of this witness may throw a new light upon the subject of Duke Selwyn's death. Our examination has already developed singular complications, and I especially advise you all to withold your judgment until the jury have formed theirs. We will resume, if our witnesses can be found, to-morrow morning, at ten o'clock." He finished with a gesture unceremonious but significant; it meant dismissal, and the audience slowly, reluctantly, with much confusion, and many exchanges of gratuitous opinions, began to disperse.

A few halted at the bar to see if Mack, "meant business," where they were speedily assured that he did. Thereupon they crowded out into the street, setting their faces toward

other houses of good cheer; and that night at Doty's, the Gold Horn, the Alhambra, and in other dens with grandiose names, a rich harvest was reaped, much vile liquor was disposed of, and the case of Duke Selwyn was discussed until morning.

While the crowd in the outer room was slowly lessening, those who were seated in the inner room began to move, and converse one with another. Mack and Connelley, withdrawing from the others, whispered earnestly. The jury began to exchange low toned comments, and to emphasize them with expressive nods and winks—all but Podunk, who, sitting with his elbows upon his knees, seemed taking a languid survey of everything, and to find nothing of interest. He saw that Vernet was monopolizing the attention of Miss Wray, and gradually leading her toward the entrance; that Dalton had made his way to the side of Aileen Lorne, and was talking earnestly; and that Miss Rosabella Saint Leger had fallen into the ruthless hands of Aubrey, Florine, and Kit Duncan. He saw Mountain Mag, standing with erect head and folded arms within hearing of the group about Miss Saint Leger, seeming to see and hear nothing, and to wait impatiently the movements of the crowd. He saw that the Coroner had not stirred from his place, but was standing there erect and watchful, speaking to no one, and wearing a look of severe impartiality. Then, as if quite satisfied with his careless survey, Podunk sank back in his chair, and serenely waited.

After a few moment's conference, Mack and Connolley hurried to the outer room, and became active in hastening the steps of the laggards. Still Podunk remained in his place, and the Coroner remained in his. Presently the way was clear. They saw Vernet lead Miss Wray to the door; saw Mag, still with folded arms and preoccupied manner, go slowly

out behind them; saw Aileen Lorne and Philip Dalton, as on the previous day, walk together to the street corner, and there separate; saw the other witnesses going their respective ways —and then the Coroner called sharply:

"Close the doors, Mack."

It was done; and Regulators and jury, Mack and the Coroner, were shut in—the crowd, yet lingering about the place, was shut out. Then the Coroner turned, and his tone became at once mildly urgent.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing the waiting and wondering jurymen, "I ask, as a favor to me and to all connected with this affair, that you do not go upon the street to-night; that you keep as much as possible together, and talk with no one outside of yourselves. I have already arranged that you have your suppers at the St. Charles, but you can't sleep there; and I think that we can do no better than to come back here, and let Mack make you as comforable as he can for the night. As for the rest of you, Connolley must arrange matters. Gentlemen of the jury, do you agree to this?"

One or two grumbled out an objection, but the majority assented, and Podunk roused himself enough to say

"'Tall looks purfeckly reglar to *me*. I guess, with a pipe and a little somethin' moist, and mebbe a keard or two, we kin manage to waller through."

This view of the case seemed to make its impression upon the demurring jurors, and the assent became unanimous.

After some consultation, it was decided that the Regulators, such as remained there on duty, would occupy the outer saloon; and that the Theatre should be at the disposal of the jurymen.

This being decided, the Coroner beckoned Mack and Connolley aside, and said to them:

"I am going to the hotel with these fellows, and shall see what I can pick up there. I don't think it is well for us three to be seen in council too often. I wish, after we go, that you and Connolley would separate and keep apart. I think it would be wise for one of you to take a look about town and see what the popular feeling is—the other, of course, should stay here. But as you both seem to have something on your minds, and as I want to get the benefit of it—as privately as possible—I wish you would come to the St. Charles, say at nine o'clock?"

"I don't see," broke in Mack, "why we can't go around to my office and have it out now."

"And let all Caledonia see that we are holding a council of war! Pshaw! Mack, you know better than to suggest such a thing. We want as little appearance of mystery as possible. They know their business at the St. Charles; we can talk *there* without having it advertised."

"But why can't we come earlier, then?" persisted Mack; "why—"

"Look here, Mack," exclaimed the Coroner impatiently, "I should like to manage my own business in my own way, but since you persist, I'll tell you. I want to learn what I can about that missing stranger who came with Miss Wray, and I want time to work in. We shall have to look that matter up; and I may be able to tell you something about it when you come. Is it agreed?"

"I'll be there," said Connolley promptly.

"And I," said Mack, but he said it reluctantly; and as the Coroner turned away, he muttered, "but I'm blamed if I can see what he wants of Cool Hank!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Very little was said by Vernet and Barbara Wray during their walk back to the St. Charles. But when they were again in the little parlor, she turned toward him, saying:

"May I ask you a few questions, Mr. ——?" She hesitated, and a half smile flitted across her face. "Will you furnish me a name by which it is safe to address you?"

"You may ask any number of questions, Miss Wray," he said with an answering smile. "And—" he put a card into her hand,—"that will give you the information you desire."

She took the card and read the printed name, GEO. MORGAN, and underneath the business formula, "*with*, HAMMOND AND WALL, *Importers, N. Y.*"

"I'm a commercial traveller," Vernet explained as he placed a chair for her, "taking a vacation."

"I see," she said, seating herself and bestowing upon him a look of grave intelligence. "Have you attended this trial—is trial the word?—from the beginning?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me about it?"

"Willingly; it is best that you should know." He began at the beginning, and briefly sketched the doings of the morning, telling how, after the inquiry had adjourned, he had met and talked with Dalton, but he did not mention Stanhope's part in the affair. He told, generously, how Dalton had com-

mended Miss Wray to his care, and then gave an account of the proceedings of the afternoon.

"Do you not think," she said, after a moment's reflection, "that this Coroner is disposed to be friendly?"

"Toward whom?"

"Toward you—myself—Mr. Dalton."

"Yes, I think so. I like his face. I mean to have an interview with him—to-night, if possible. I fancy that our desire for a meeting is mutual."

"And Mr. Dalton—*he* cannot be guilty?"

"I do not believe him guilty."

"It's a horrible accusation; and it would seem they have some evidence, circumstantial of course, against him. Those pistols—such a hideous coincidence! What do you think the explanation can be?"

"I have hardly arranged my ideas. I believe Dalton might tell more, if he would. It's a queer case. Miss Wray, I think you are to be congratulated; I dreaded your appearance before the Coroner, but everything went well. You have the sympathy of these rough Caledonians. If you should need their help, the way is opened."

"Their help! You mean in the search for my father? Oh, what a terrible place this is, where men disappear, or are shot down in the street; where life is so lightly esteemed. I am distressed, too, about that man, Mr. Follingsbee's friend, who came here with us. Has *he*, too, really disappeared?"

Vernet, who had been standing before her, walked to the door, saw that it was close shut, and then, returning, seated himself near her.

"Miss Wray," he said, in a low tone, "what I am about to say is a mere suggestion, but draw all the comfort you can

from it. I do not think you will be subject to cross-questions, but if you are, remember this is only a *supposable* case. I know Mr. Follingsbee, and I don't believe he is the man to do a careless thing, especially in such a matter as this. Now, don't you think it would seem like recklessness to send you on such a journey with an unreliable escort?"

"Oh, I cannot censure Mr. Follingsbee. I am sure he thought the gentleman could be relied upon."

"So am I. And I am equally sure that where you were concerned, Mr. Follingsbe would not make a mistake."

"I don't understand you."

"Has it ever occurred to you that Mr. Follingsbee may have secretly shared your anxiety concerning your father, and that he may have sent you here in the care—unknown to yourself—of, say, a gentleman of my own profession?"

"Oh!" she cried breathlessly, "surely, surely, it could not have been *you?*"

"Unhappily, no. I have been in this Western world nearly a month, Miss Wray."

"But," she demurred, "why need Mr. Follingsbee conceal from me the identity of such a person, if this suggestion were true?"

"You forget—" here the thought of the gorgeous curls caused him to smile again—"you forget that you had for a companion, Miss Susan Collins Saint Leger."

"True," she admitted, and smiled in her turn, the smile passing swiftly to give place to a wistful glance from under her dark lashes. "If I could only think it were true that some one was looking for my father; that this stranger were what you say! If I dared to hope it!"

"I advise you to think it, to hope it; but not to say or to hint it."

"You advise it! Would *you* think this? Have you a reason?"

"I advise you—nay, I implore you—ask me, on this subject, no questions. Yes, if I were you, I would believe that the stranger who vanished last night, is safe; is perfectly able to take care of himself; and that he has not forgotten you and your interests."

For a moment their eyes met—hers questioning, his assuring. Then she held out a small white hand.

"Thank you," she said softly; "already I begin to feel less desolate, less alone."

He held her hand in his own firm clasp for a moment, releasing it as a sound at the door caused her to turn her head. Some one had tried the knob, then seemed to hesitate; and while they both looked, and Vernet half rose from his chair, the door slowly opened, and Mountain Mag appeared upon the threshold.

She stopped at sight of the pair near the window, and a crimson flush mounted to her cheek. But Vernet, with the instinct of a true gentleman, came promptly to the rescue.

"Miss Drood," he said, going toward her, "pray come in. I hope you have not quite forgotten me." Then he turned to Barbara. "Miss Wray," he said courteously, "this is Miss Drood. I have had the pleasure of visiting her ranch and partaking of her hospitality."

Barbara bowed with grave courtesy, but Mag's embarrassment continued.

"I came—" she began; "I mean, I wanted—to speak with this lady—if she will let me."

Barbara's eyes went instinctively to Vernet's face, and the glance that met hers was reassuring.

"Certainly, Miss Drood," she said quickly. "Will you not be seated?"

Vernet moved forward the chair he had lately occupied, and then said lightly, as he turned toward the door, "While you converse I will look up our friend Dalton. For the present, ladies, I leave you."

For a moment after the door had closed behind him, Mountain Mag stood irresolute and reddening under the gaze of Miss Wray. Then she took a step forward and hesitatingly said:

"Miss Wray, I know I've surprised you—I'm a rough woman, and I don't understand how to say things right, but I heard your story down there, and it made my heart ache. I begun to realize what an awful thing it must be for you to be here, alone, and in such trouble. You're not used to our life. I'm not a fit companion for you; I'm too ignorant, and my ways ain't what they ought to be. But I'm an honest girl, and nobody in Caledonia'll respect you less for associating with me, whatever people in your world may think of my uncouthness. If there was any one here more fit to be a friend to you, I shouldn't have ventured; but there ain't. And so, Miss Wray, I ask you to come to my house and make it your home while you stay here. It's a plain, rough place, but it's fitter for you than this—and you alone. And you'd be more than welcome."

During this long, and, to Mag, painful speech, she had kept her eyes—and very handsome, earnest ones they were—fixed full upon Barbara's face. The latter, with a woman's unerring instinct, read her truth and sincerity in them. When Mag ceased speaking, Barbara arose slowly and came close to her, her own eyes humid.

"Miss Drood," she said, "is it possible? Do you mean this?"

"Yes," said Mag simply, "I mean it. Honestly, Miss Wray, I think it's the best you can do; and I'll try very hard to make you comfortable. I've got a good, motherly old woman for a housekeeper, and she'll do her best too."

For a moment Barbara stood before her silent, with eyes downcast, and trembling lips. Suddenly, she looked up, held out her hand, and, as Mag took it in her warm, firm grasp, her splendid self-control forsook her. She uttered a choking sob, and in a moment was weeping on Mountain Mag's shoulder, with Mountain Mag's strong arm about her slender waist.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PODUNK'S OPINION.

The gentlemen of the Coroner's jury, having nothing more urgent or agreeable to draw them away from the bread and cheese of the St. Charles, lingered over their meal, and made much of it. But the Coroner, who had found opportunity to whisper a word in the ear of Podunk, and another in the ear of the Clerk, left them after a hearty meal, and passed out into the office.

"About that room, Charlie?" he said to the clerk.

"All ready, sir."

"Well, go ahead."

The clerk took a lamp from the shelf behind him, saying, as

he lighted it, "You'll want a little Caledonia gas." He led the way up the stairs, and into a large room, almost opposite the twin rooms where Dalton and Vernet had met. It was newly furnished, with the usual necessities of a hotel sleeping apartment, and as Charlie set the lamp upon a small stand, he said: "Anything wanted here?"

"Yes; an extra chair or two."

"All right, Doctor." He vanished and was back in a moment, with two chairs.

"Now," said Doctor Mitchell, "go down, Charlie, and contrive to get that fellow in the red shirt that's with the jury—"

"Podunk?" queried Charlie, with a grin.

"Yes, Podunk—what a name! Bring him up here, Charlie, and do it quietly. If Mack and Connolley come before I see you again, let me know, but *don't* show them up. Wait; where does that good-looking fellow room—the one who came for the young lady?"

"You mean Morgan?"

"I don't know his name—what's his room?"

"Last one on this hall, this side."

"All right; now for Podunk."

Charlie nodded and hurried away, to return in a moment with Podunk, solemn and expectant, at his heels.

"Oh! you are on hand," said the Doctor, motioning him to enter; "come in. You may go, Charlie."

Charlie grinned and vanished, and Podunk sidled into the room.

"Shut the door," said the Doctor curtly.

Podunk obeyed with due meekness.

"Sit down."

Podunk sat down on the edge of a chair, and rested his hands upon his knees.

"How long have you been in Caledonia?" asked the Doctor abruptly.

"Couple o' days," replied Podunk promptly.

"Where did you come from?"

"Red Valley diggin's."

'Umph! What brought you here?"

"Wal, I came mostly on a danged old yaller mustang, but the critter flopped me off to'rds the last,—when I s'posed he was tired out, and had got over watchin' for tricks. So I hoofed it in."

"Umph! I meant, what's your business here?"

"Oh!—prospectin'."

"It's my opinion," said the Doctor, fixing his keen eyes upon Podunk, "it's my opinion that you'r a card sharp."

"Z" that so?" queried Podunk serenely.

"Your hands don't look as if you had done much digging."

"Don't?" said Podunk.

"Didn't you tell them down at Mack's that you were a miner?"

"I disremember."

"Well—" in spite of himself Doctor Mitchell smiled at the fellow's coolness—"I don't think you are very dull, anyway. Will you answer a few fair questions fairly?"

"Fair's the word, or not at all."

"When I gave you permission to question the witnesses to-day," began the Doctor slowly, "you did it in a manner which convinced me that you had a reason for what you said. I want you to tell me what that reason was."

Podunk suddenly drew himself up, and hitched his chair nearer that of the Coroner.

"*Now!*" he exclaimed, "you're talkin' about somethin' that *consarns* ye! I don't take kindly to folks that git too interested in my private affairs, but I'm with ye on this jury business. Ye're right, Mister Coroner. I *didn't* ask them questions just to hear myself talk, though,—" with a grin—"that peared to be the general opinion."

"Yes," assented Doctor Mitchell, smiling also. "Now what *was* your motive?"

"Wal," began Podunk, lowering his voice and assuming an air of exceeding candor, "I may as well spit it out, I s'pose, seein' we've got so fur. This mornin' I had a kind of a s'picion that one of yer witnesses wasn't tellin' quite all she knew. But I guess, maybe, I was mistook."

"Who was this witness?"

"Between you an' me, an' without meanin' to speak agin the gal, it was Mounting Mag, as ye call her."

"Margaret Drood? I thought as much."

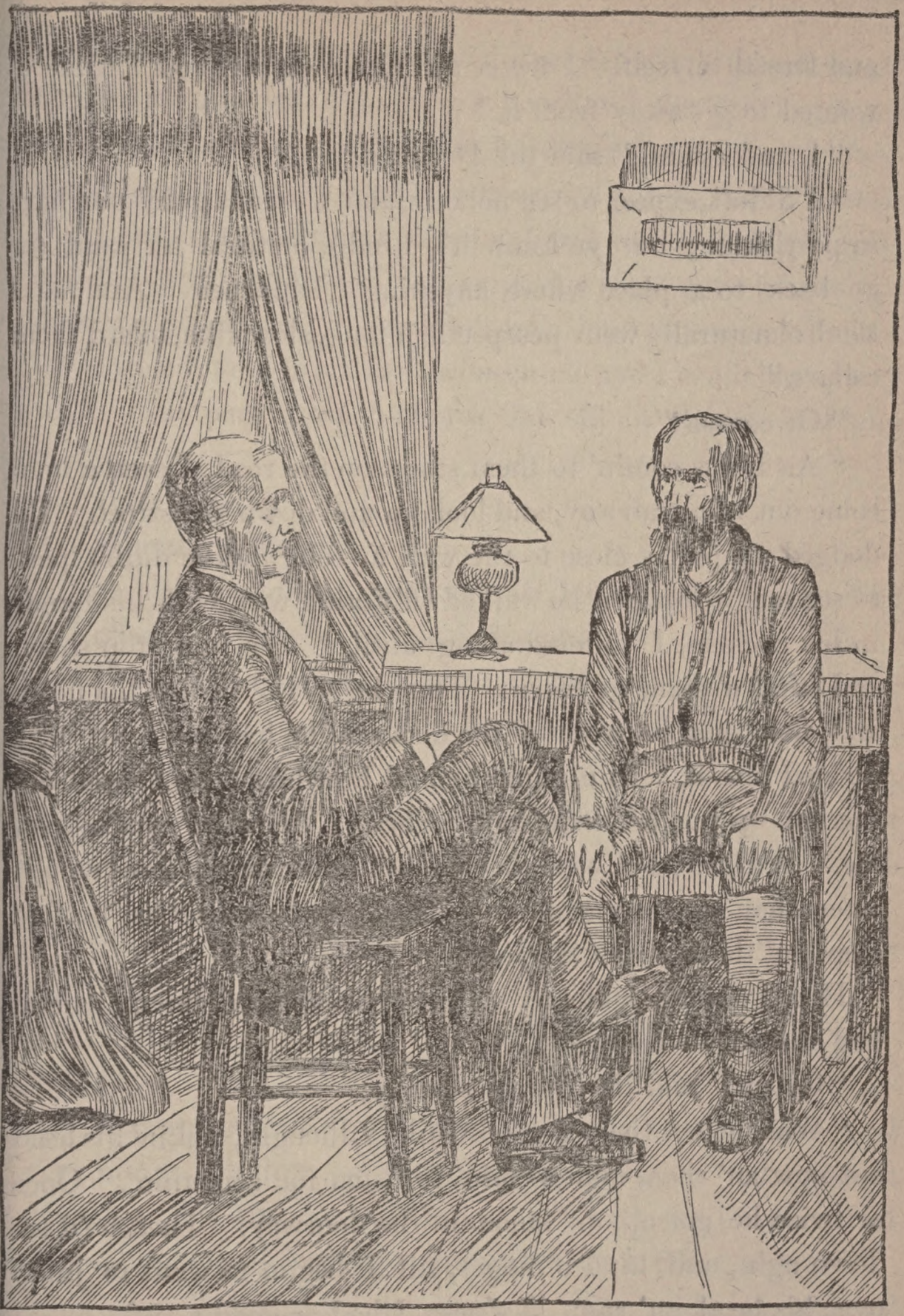
"Eh?"

"I fancied I saw your purpose. Why do you think she knows more than she told?"

"Wal," said Podunk, with an air of great reluctance, "she didn't exactly tell the truth. Ye see, I was with the gang at Mack's when the news of the murder come, and I went along with the crowd after the body."

"Yes, yes."

"I couldn't help noticin' Mounting Mag—she's kind o' uncommon, ye see. When she set out, I wanted to foller her, but I couldn' 'thout bein' noticed. So I lopped around until about the time you came, and then slipped out to git a breath,



"It's my opinion," said the Doctor, "that you're a card sharp!"—Page 155.

and stretch myself. I never did like a corpse, and I kind o' wanted to git away from it."

"I understand," said the Doctor dryly.

"I didn't expect to see nobody, and I wasn't goin' nowhere in particklar; but ye know it's kind o' natural ter want ter go back to a place where anything's happened. And so *I* kind o' naturally went prospectin' along, slow like, to'ard them cellars."

"Of course!"

"As I was comin' to them stores on the road, I seen a man come out of a stairway, and look up and down the street. I'd dodged up pretty close to the wall myself, and he didn't 'pear to see me. So when he walked off t'other way, with his hands in his pockets, I follered along until I seen him stop short, and kind o' seem to listen. Then he sort o' turned his head, and, bein' just in front of the doorway he had come out of, I dodged into it. In a minit I could hear him comin' back, an' I crept up two or three stairs, where I knew he couldn't see me. Wal, sir, I'll be sizzled if that feller didn't come smack inter that stairway, and set himself down onto the bottom step, an' there *I* was, cooped!"

Here Podunk, evidently believing in effective climax, paused and waited for comment.

"Go on," said the Doctor sharply.

"Wal, he sot there a good while, *I* thought, pokin' his head out now an' then, and seemin' to listen for somethin'. Once or twice he got up, an' stood in the doorway. Then he'd set down agin, and kind o' fidget, till I begun to want to jump over his head an' run. I s'pose I had as good a right to set there, now I come to think, as he had; but that idea didn't strike me then, an' I didn't want any argyment—I'm naterally

a peaceful person. So I sot still; an' bime'by I heard somethin' that sounded like horse's hoofs, an' the feller got up and went clean outside. Then I got kind o' cur'us to know what was up. It was well on toward daylight, and a person could see a little, at short range. I was in the dark stairway, and felt purty safe; so I jest crept down an' got close to the door, an' listened. They didn't talk loud by no means, but there wasn't more'n six feet between us, and I could hear purty well. The person on the horse slid off, an' then I seed who it was."

"Who was it?"

"Mounting Mag."

The Doctor started, and fixed his keen eyes upon the face of Podunk. "Well?" he said sharply.

"I didn't hear much, but what I heard was different from Mag's story this mornin'. 'Wal, Munk?' she says to him; and then he says, kind o' cringin' like, 'I didn't find him, Mag; he ain't been in the all-night places.' Then she says, 'Be ye *sure?*' And he answers, 'Sure's askin' could make me; *I don't believe Hank's been in town sence yisterday.*'"

"Stop!" broke in the Doctor, "are you positive that he said *Hank?*"

"Sartin."

"Go on."

"That's about all of it. She told him to take her horse and give him a rub down, and then go an' see what was doin' at Mack's. He said he had been thar; that the Coroner had jest come, and there was a rumpus about a feller named Podunk, that had turned up missin'. That made me kind o' anxious to git back. And when they left, which was immegiate, I got away from thar."

"What inferences did you draw from this conversation?"

"Huh?"

"What did you think about it?"

"Nothin' pertickiler, till I heard Mounting Mag testify. Then I kind o' took a tumble."

"Wasn't it you who put that idea about the moon, and the time, into that juror's head? I saw you whispering to him."

"Wal, maybe it was."

"Why didn't you put those questions yourself?"

"Ye see," said Podunk with a confiding smile, "I'm kind o' diffydent, and I thought I was gettin' most too conspicuous."

"Now that I consider," went on the Doctor, "it was this same juror who suggested Monckton as a desirable witness. May be you had a hand in *that*, too?"

"Mebbe," assented Podunk.

"I want to ask you what you think of this?"

"This what?"

"This interview which you heard."

"Oh! Wal, I think if Mounting Mag told the truth, she didn't tell it all. If she met this here Munkin at Doty's, as she says, she must a met him *twice:* an' the question comes up, *why* twice?"

"How do you answer it?"

"I don't answer it—not much! But if she had sent that Munkin after the other feller, Hank, the *first* time, and went the *second* time to see if he was found, t'would make that much clear. Now *I* want ter ask sumthin'. Who's this Hank?"

"Cool Hank, or Hank Dutton. He's said to be a friend of Mag's."

"Oh!"

"I'm going to tell you something, and I have a reason for

it. I learned to-day that Cool Hank Dutton and Duke Selwyn quarreled fiercely three days ago."

"Oh!" said Podunk again, but he did not show the alert interest the Doctor had expected. "I don't know but I'd better a kept still," he resumed, after a musing silence. "If I'd a heard all the witnesses afore I let out, I never should have begun."

"Why?"

"Why! 'Cause now it looks to *me* like a clear case."

"Against whom?"

"Why, that good-lookin', high-toned feller, Dalton. Mebbe he won't allus be so high-toned, eh?"

"Why have you decided against him?"

"Land o' Moses! didn't he as much as say he was the owner of them two pistils? An' then his quarrelin', an' not bein' found when he woz wanted."

The Doctor made no reply. He was beginning to think he had overrated the native shrewdness of his eccentric juror Finally he said:

"We should not attach too much weight to circumstantial evidence."

"No," replied Podunk dubiously, "but ye don't *find* an eye witness to a murder only now an' then. I guess the gineral opinion is that Dalton's the man; an' if he is—" He paused here and jerked his head suggestively.

"Podunk," asked the Doctor suddenly, "do you believe in mob law?"

"Do you mean hustlin' and lynchin'?"

"Yes."

"*No*, sir; I *don't!* I ain't got no use for 'em. I'm agin 'em every time!"

"Do you intend to stay in Caledonia?"

"I guess I'll stop a spell."

"How would you like to join the Regulators?"

"*Me!* Lord love ye, Doctor, *I* ain't no fighter, an' that's a fact. My talents don't run to'rds it; they run,"—grinning broadly—"right the other way."

"So? You carry your talent in your legs, do you? Well, you're not alone in that." Here the Doctor arose, walked to the door, opened it, and looked out quickly. His ear had caught a low musical whistle, and as he looked, a bar of an opera tune was wafted into the room, and he saw that Vernet was passing his door.

At the sound of the opening door, Vernet turned his head; and then, as he caught the eye of Doctor Mitchell, halted suddenly and ceased his musical effort.

"Wait one moment," said the Doctor; and leaving the door ajar he turned to Podunk.

"I'd like to talk with you again," he said; "and you'll oblige me by not speaking to the others about this meeting of ours. You understand?"

"I reckon I do, Doctor. Much obleeged to ye. Ye can count on Podunk."

Doctor Mitchell looked out to see that no one was in the upper hall, and then held open the door for Podunk's exit. As he stood thus, he faced the west. Vernet was below, to the right; and Podunk, passing out, went a few paces to the left and then turned an abrupt angle. As Podunk thus passed from sight, the Doctor, looking down the hall, saw that Vernet had retreated a few paces toward his own door. But what he did not see, was the signal that had just been exchanged by the two.

Thinking that he had not been understood, and not wishing to raise his voice, the Doctor, leaving his door wide open, took two quick strides and was six feet away from his room, with his back toward it and his eyes fixed upon Vernet. At that instant the latter saw, across his shoulder, a flash of red around the angle and in at the open door; and he knew that whoever the Doctor's next visitor might be, he would have Podunk for audience.

"Will you come into my room?" Doctor Mitchell was saying courteously. "I think we had better understand each other."

"By all means," returned Vernet, rejoiced at a situation which would make Stanhope one at their councils. "Thank you, Doctor."

In a moment they were within the room, face to face, and with locked door.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BEGINNING OF HOSTILITIES.

"Doctor Mitchell," began Vernet, "I do not know your exact position in this business, but since I know that I can trust you I mean to make mine plain to you. I am here as the friend of Philip Dalton, and it was as such that I signaled you to-day."

"I presumed as much," said the Doctor with a grave bow.

"I foresee that he will need a friend, many friends perhaps, and before I take too much of your time, I would like to ask,

have you any prejudices against Mr. Dalton?—any doubts concerning his innocence?"

"Prejudices I certainly have none, sir. As for my doubts, and opinions, that is another matter. Personally, I like Dalton. If I am compelled to declare him guilty, it will be reluctantly, and with regret. I intend to do all that lies in my power to prove to myself, and to all Caledonia, that he is innocent."

"That will become my business, too. But before I propose an alliance, I owe you a word of explanation. I have been in Caledonia more or less for three weeks, and I have managed to pick up considerable information, so that I *do* know something of you—"

"I wonder," interrupted Doctor Mitchell, gravely scrutinizing his *vis a vis*, "why I have not chanced to see you in all that time."

"You have seen me, and I you; but my business made a disguise necessary, hence—"

"A disguise!"

"Yes; I am a detective."

"Upon my word!" ejaculated the Doctor, "I never should have thought it."

"Nevertheless it is true. My name is Vernet, and my business here—"

"Concerns the Overland Mail and Stage people, doesn't it?" interrupted the Doctor quickly.

"Really!" It was now Vernet's turn to look surprised.

"Oh, I'm not a wizard, nor simply a good guesser," went on the Doctor. "I have been looking for you. It was I, in truth, who first called the attention of the Company to the fact that a good detective was needed here. And I had to re-

peat the advice more than once. I did it very privately, you may be sure; Caledonia has its prejudices."

"I am finding that out. Well, I tell you frankly, sir, that hunting stage robbers will absorb very little of my attention until Philip Dalton is extricated from his present difficulty."

"I shouldn't wonder if you would find the lines running closer than you think, Mr. Vernet. Sit down; we can talk a little, although my object in addressing you just now was simply to arrange for an interview later."

Vernet seated himself opposite and very near the Doctor, and for a moment contemplated him so earnestly that he finally ejaculated:

"Well, what is it?"

"I am wondering," Vernet said, with one of his rare smiles, "if I do not owe it to myself and to you to give some proof of my identity."

"Proof? nonsense! Don't I tell you that I have been daily on the watch for you. I wonder that I did not guess you out at first. It was only, if you will permit me to say it, your general air of superiority, of aristocracy, that misled me. I set you down for a man of fashion—"

"Thanks," laughed Vernet.

"Some rich man's only son," went on the Doctor, a twinkle of fun in his eye; "or maybe an English nabob."

"Oh! a thousand thanks!"

"I've had my eye on all new comers for sometime, you see—and here the Doctor, who never laughed outright, gave utterance to a chuckle of amusement—"and perhaps you'll be pleased to hear that I had finally lighted upon that queer fellow, Podunk, as the looked-for detective.

I really gave him credit—at first—for considerable shrewdness."

Vernet was, indeed, pleased with this statement; his amusement, the Doctor thought, was almost in excess of the cause. But after a while he managed to ejaculate, inquiringly:

"You say '*at first?*'"

"Yes. I must do myself the justice to declare that I had abandoned that notion before you made yourself known. The fellow struck me this morning as shrewder than he seemed; but upon trial, he don't come up to my standard. He's one of these queer Yankee mixtures—sharp on one side, and dull on the other. He lacks perception. He wouldn't be worth much at following a clue. He jumps at new ideas too easily."

"Really!" ejaculated Vernet, who found it difficult to utter even that. He knew that Podunk was even then sprawling under the bed, there being no other place of hiding in the room, and mentally saw him quaking and half strangling with merriment. He even fancied he could hear a suppressed "snicker", but at that instant a light tap at the door called the Doctor's attention. Motioning Vernet to remain silent, he arose and asked:

"Who's there?"

"Charlie," answered the voice of the Clerk.

Instantly the Doctor turned the key, opened the door, and thrust his head out cautiously.

"Well, Charlie?" he whispered.

"Mack and Connolley are below, sir."

"Have they inquired for me?"

"Yes."

"All right; I'll be down in a moment. Keep out of their way, boy, so they can't ask any questions."

"All right, Doctor." He withdrew, and Doctor Mitchell closed and relocked the door.

"Mack and Connolley are below," he said slowly. "They don't like the way I am conducting this business, and have come to labor with me." He paused and scanned the face of Vernet narrowly. "I wish," he said hesitatingly, "I wish you could be present at the interview—present, yet invisible."

"The very thing," said Vernet eagerly. "I don't understand those men. Shall we manage it?"

"I don't see how we can," said the Doctor, running his eyes about the room.

"Leave that to me. Just go out and lock the door on the outside. Go down slowly, and bring them back with you; unlock the door and usher them in. They won't think of looking about the room, if you handle the key. I'll manage the thing while you're gone."

"Oh! I'm to lock you in, eh?"

"Precisely."

"Well," with a humorous twinkle of his grey eyes, "if you intend to get under that bed I give you Sarah Gamp's advice: 'take his piller.'"

"All right, Doctor. Just make a little noise at the door, to warn me of your approach; that's all I ask."

When he was gone, and the door locked, Vernet quickly moved the light stand and placed the lamp where its rays could not fall upon the bed, and then arranged the chairs between the bed and the light. This done, he pulled off his perfectly fitting coat; deftly turned it wrong side out; donned it again, and then, droping lightly upon the floor, rolled himself quickly under the bed.

"Crowd along, old man," he whispered to the living ob

stacle that stopped his progress. "Here's comfort for two."

"The deuce it is," grumbled Podunk. "You needn't come like a cyclone; you've filled my eyes and mouth full of dust."

"I shut mine," retorted Vernet; "you'd better do likewise. What do you think of this business, Dick?"

"I think that I shall sneeze out of turn, and give us all away."

"For Heaven's sake, don't! Here, get yourself settled as well as you can. I've a suspicion that Mack's an enemy to Dalton for some reason; I think he means mischief."

"So do I," said the other. "Lord, this bed's too low for comfort."

"But none too low for safety; hush!"

There was a noise outside, a fumbling at the lock, and then the door opened and Doctor Mitchell entered, followed by Mack and Connolley.

"Here we are," said the Doctor, as he turned and locked the door; "sit down, gentlemen." He seated himself in one of the chairs, as Vernet had placed it, with his face toward the bed, and the two men took the places opposite him. The Doctor's face was in the shadow, while theirs was directly in the light. Reassured by the adroitness of Vernet's management, the Doctor tilted back his chair, drew a breath of relief, and said:

"Now then, Mack, what's on your mind?"

"Doc," began Mack with a round oath and an air of bluster, "I want to know what you're driving at?"

"Make it clearer, Mack."

"What do you mean by letting Dalton off so easily? By George! it looks as if you were trying to acquit him, instead of proving him guilty."

"Oh!" said the Doctor softly, as if to himself, "sits the

wind thus!" Then in a tone of mild remonstrance: "Mack you know that I don't like interference, and I'd tell any men but you and Connolley to go about their business. But I hate to see you dissatisfied, for I know that it's your friendship for Selwyn that so stimulates your zeal. Tell me what you find wrong and I'll try to make things plain."

"Wrong!" Mack's tone was not quite so aggressive now, and his countenance relaxed a little. "Why, you *must* see, Doc, that there's enough testimony to hang Dalton twice over; and yet you dismissed that jury just because some paltry witness wasn't on hand! I tell you the boys are hot!"

"What boys? Yours, Connolley?"

Connolley shook his head.

"Of course not," cried Mack. "I mean the others—Selwyn's friends; half of Caledonia."

"Oh," said the Doctor with suspicious mildness, "only half? Look here, Mack, you mix your phrases horribly. In the first place, I didn't *dismiss* my jury; I only adjourned it. In the second place, *testimony* cannot convict; it requires *evidence*. There's been more testimony than evidence in this case."

"I don't see the difference," growled Mack.

"Perhaps; but I intend to make my jury see the difference, and understand it too, before they pronounce upon the case. Now let us reason. Connolley, do you share Mack's feelings?"

"Yes," replied Connolley, after some hesitation; "I want to see fair play, but it looks as if there was a clear case against Dalton."

"*Looks* so? exactly. There it is, Connolley. Now do you call it fair play not to give a suspected man every chance to prove himself, or be proved, innocent?"

"Why, no."

"And do you call it fair, or wise, to neglect every clue that may fasten the guilt upon another, simply because we have some strong circumstantial evidence against Dalton? If it appears that Selwyn had another enemy, that they also had quarreled, and that this second enemy, too, is a fit subject for suspicion—isn't it fair to give Dalton the benefit of the doubt?"

"Of course it is," said Connolley quickly.

"But," said Mack excitedly, "there's no such case, no such person!"

"How do you know that, Mack?" The Doctor's voice was still mildly remonstrative.

"How do I know! Good Lord, do you *want* to clear that *assassin?*"

"Certainly; if he is innocent."

"But he *ain't* innocent; he can't be."

"Can you prove that?"

"Prove it! Why, ain't it already proved?"

"No."

"Look here, Doc, the mischief fly away with your law terms, your ifs and ands, you know and *I* know that Dalton's guilty."

"You know it?"

"Yes," said Mack doggedly.

"Did you see Dalton shoot Selwyn?"

"No,"—with an impatient gesture—"of course not.

"Can you produce a witness, *one who can't be impeached,* who did?"

"Bah—no!"

"Then I advise you not to say that you *know* Dalton's guilty. If I should catch you up on that assertion, put you

"How do I know? Good Lord! do you *want* to clear that assassin?"
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on the witness stand, and call up Connolley to say that he heard you state this, you wouldn't cut much of a figure."

Mack was silent but his brow was wrathful.

"Now, gentlemen," went on the Doctor, still speaking like one who wishes to conciliate, although his words were not of a strictly conciliatory nature, "if you have a rational criticism, or a practical suggestion to make, in Heaven's name out with it! I'm always open to *reason*, and will be thankful for any helpful hint."

Mack was silent; and after a moment's hesitation Connolley said:

"I don't want to find fault, Doctor. You've allus done the right thing by us all, and I don't blieve you've got an enemy in Caledonia."

"I don't know about that," murmured the Doctor pensively, and letting his eyes rest for a moment upon Mack.

"Me, an' the boys, have done all that we could, and all that you've told us to, in this business, ain't we?"

"Yes," assented the Doctor. And then added so gently that it did not sound, to Connolley, at least, like criticism, "and a little more."

"Well, we mean to stick by you, and we don't want to grumble, but we don't quite see what you're up to, and we thought it wouldn't do any harm to ask what ye intend to do."

The Doctor leaned toward his questioner, and lifted a lean, brown forefinger.

"Do you mean," he asked, with a faint return of his official manner, "do you mean, How am I going to conduct this inquiry, or to continue it?"

"Yes."

"Well," straightening himself and thrusting his hands deep

down into his pockets, "I'll enlighten you both. I'm going to hear all the evidence that I can get; and before I let the jury take the case, I'll be *sure* that they understand it. I'm going to bar out all personal spite and prejudice, come from what quarter it may; or, if I can't keep it out, I'll take care to show it up for what it's worth. In the meantime, I depend upon you and your men, Connolley, to keep things quiet. As for the dissatisfied half of Caledonia that Mack talks of, he knows, and *I* know, that he can control *them*, if he will. Selwyn's friends and Mack's friends are identical. Lastly, I'm going to advise you both, and everybody else, not to be in too great a hurry to pronounce Dalton guilty. If he's proven guilty, very good. If he's *not* guilty, I'm going to see him through, and I expect the Regulators to back me."

Mack started up, and was about to speak, but Connolley was before him.

"Doctor, I dare say you mean the fair thing," he said, "but I'm afraid it won't work. The fact is the boys are wild about this postponing business. They think there's evidence enough against Dalton, and their blood's up. If you wouldn't mind making it a little clearer what you're waitin' for—"

"Clearer!" broke in Mack. "When it turns out that that red-shirted fellow who asked so many fool questions about Mountain Mag, has put it into somebody's head that Monckton ought to be examined, and when they find that the thing's only done to make delay, it won't be any better for Dalton's neck, now *I* tell you."

Mack, thoroughly enraged, was standing bristling before the Doctor, who slowly withdrew his hands from his pockets and slowly arose

"Mack," he said, in a low tone that was yet so full of force

and meaning that it caused his listeners, visible and invisible, to start and wait eagerly for his next words—"Mack, I've been inclined, for some time past, to drop you a word of advice, and I'll do it now. If you study your own interest, you will give your attention *exclusively* to your Theatrical business, and keep clear of mobs and indignation meetings. It's well understood that you are down on Dalton; but I advise you to be careful. If there is any attempt at mobbing or lynching, I shall hold *you* responsible. If you would turn your attention to hunting out some of the outlaws that harbor in and about Caledonia, it would be better for you, and *safer*. I've been here long enough to know you *better than you think*, and I warn you. You will do well not to interfere in this business—it might hurt you in the end."

Mack's face was white with rage, but without a second glance toward him, the Doctor turned quickly to Connolley.

"Connolley," he said, with abated severity, "you're an honest man, I believe, and you mean to do your duty. But have a care how you listen to the advice of others—of outsiders. Remember, it's *you*, not Mack, who is Captain of the Regulators And remember this, too: While you, urged on by outside influence, are giving all your attention to this case, remember that a stage has been attacked only twelve miles from this town; that last night a man disappeared from the St. Charles and can't be found; that we have among us a young lady whose father disappeared from our very midst; that even among your own band there is a man missing. Do you think this is a time to encourage mob law? Wait; let me finish. Since you and your Regulators have been in authority here, all these things have happened; and *six times* the stages have been stopped and robbed. Every time you have

attempted a raid, it has failed. *Hadn't you better study out the reason?* I wouldn't like to see you superseded here, but these things have been noticed; and peacable citizens, who are trying to do honest business, are getting restless. I wouldn't like to see this town in the hands of the military, but it may come to that."

Connolley was upon his feet in an instant, his face white and earnest.

"Doctor," he said firmly, "before I go out of this room, I'm going to know what you mean."

"Ask Mack," said the Doctor grimly. But Mack, white to the lips and evidently trying to master some strong emotion, had turned toward the door.

"No," persisted the Regulator Chieftain, "I ask you."

"Well, then, listen. It is more than suspected that the stage robbers have confederates in Caledonia; and that they are *protected* by some influential person. I am not at liberty to say more, and you ought to do your own detective work. 'A word to the wise,' you know. Are you going, Mack?"

"Yes; I'm going," answered Mack from the doorway. "I'm blessed if I know what you're driving at, and I didn't come here to be bullied. If your remarks have been meant to intimidate *me*, they've fallen short o' the mark. I'll 'tend to my own business, and you 'tend to yours."

"I'll certainly do so," replied the Doctor, now perfectly tranquil, "and I'll see that you keep your word. Are you going, too, Connolley? Well, keep your eyes open, and do your thinking. I'll light you—that hall lamp's out, of course."

Mack was already outside, and the Doctor took up the lamp and followed Connolley—a bit of courtesy less for the benefit

of Mack and the Regulator than to give the concealed detective an opportunity to emerge from his undignified retreat.

As soon as they were outside, Vernet whispered to his friend:

"Better come out, Dick, and make yourself known. It's got to happen."

"Not yet," answered Stanhope; "I'm not quite ready. *I'm* doing well enough in my present character. Go ahead, you and the Doctor. He's reliable. I'll come into the game later."

"Are you going to stay here?"

"Yes. You can get me out some way."

"All right, old man." Vernet was already scrambling out from his hiding place, and he had just regained his feet, and was drawing off his reversed outer garment, when Doctor Mitchell reëntered the room.

"Well," said the Doctor, as he set the lamp down upon the stand.

"Well," echoed Vernet.

"I suppose you understand that war is now inevitable?"

"It appears so. Do you think that Mack is really so dangerous?"

"I can't begin to tell you what I think *now*. I've got to show myself outside. Do you know my place?"

"Your house?"

"Yes."

"I think so—an isolated cottage down at the south end?"

"It's very good of you to call it a cottage. Can you come there to-morrow morning, say at eight o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Then do so. Now, I must leave you. Shall I go first?"

"Perhaps it will be as well."

Doctor Mitchell nodded and went quietly out. After listening a moment, and then closing the door, Vernet said:

"Come out, Dick."

Stanhope came slowly from his hiding place, and shook the dust from his person.

"Look out, Van," he said, "and see if the way is clear. I can't stop to talk. I must mix myself up with that jury again."

Ten minutes later, as Vernet descended the stairs, he heard voices in the lower hall, and saw Podunk standing sheepishly before the Coroner and Connolley, while Charlie held a lamp and pointed to a dusky corner behind the stairs.

"I found him curled up there," the Clerk was saying, "and snoring like a pig."

"I'd like to know where he got his liquor," said Connolley.

Podunk hiccoughed, swayed, and began to stammer forth a very drunken excuse; and Vernet, smiling at his *ruse*, and satisfied that it would be successful, passed on.

CHAPTER XX.

A MIDNIGHT EXPLORATION.

That night, at an unusally early hour, there was comparative stillness at Mack's.

The Regulators, such of them as had not been picketed elsewhere by their Chief, were provided with blankets and "shake-downs," in the main saloon. The jurors were per-

mitted to occupy the long narrow hall which Mack had fitted up as a theatre, and to divide its space among themselves as they saw fit. The corpse of Duke Selwyn lay in solitude, in the closed gambling room, into which one of Regulators took an occasional hurried look, and where all the lamps were brightly burning.

The occasion was not such as to induce hilarity, and consequent wakefulness. Most of the men had been on duty all day; and some on the alert, at Mack's or elsewhere, all the night previous; and so, one by one, they rolled themselves up in their blankets, or arranged their couches, and dropped asleep.

Podunk, who had been faithful to his role, had staggered to the place between two good natured jurors. He had answered their queries as to where he got his whiskey, by drawing from his breast a flat bottle, and seeming to drink from it, with great pretense of slyness, and had coiled himself up on a hard bench, and was soon, or seemed to be, sleeping the sleep of intoxication.

During the earlier hours of the night, four or five sat about a table, trying to become wakeful and enthusiastic over a game of cards. But the company was ill assorted; the game dragged; one man dropped out, and then another. Finally the cards were abandoned, pipes were laid aside, and one by one the jurors, too, settled themselves to slumber.

A little before midnight there was scarcely a sound to be heard about the place save the occasional gusts of wind, whistling about the corner without, and the inharmonious nasal notes issuing from the dilated nostrils or open mouths of the sleepers.

At about this time, Podunk, who had been uncomfortably

couched upon three chairs, at some distance from his brethren, stirred restlessly, yawned, stretched out his arms, and finally rolled heavily to the floor. Here he lay for a full moment, gazing stupidly about him, and waiting to see if any one had been aroused by the noise of his fall. One of the nearest men muttered some indistinct words, and gathered his blanket closer about him; but there was no other sign of wakefulness, and Podunk got up as slowly and unsteadily as might be expected in a tipsy man.

He was too shrewd to attempt the thing he had in his mind with any appearance of secrecy, nor did he move with perfect silence. He had determined to make himself better acquainted with the interior of Mack's establisment, and it was one of his maxims that the boldest course is usually the safest.

He moved across the hall slowly and with every appearence of sleepy drunkenness. If a slumberer had awakened at any moment, he would have seen a man with unsteady gait, and stupid countenance, shuffling aimlessly about; and it would never have occurred to him that there was method or purpose in his halting progress. And yet Podunk was moving straight toward his object, and making no unnecessary noise.

In this manner he made his way from the Theatre proper, out into the saloon where the Regulators were in possession. They were all asleep; and Connolley, rolled in a blanket, lay stretched before the outer door, which was locked and barred.

Here Podunk paused for a momentary survey, and then he perpetrated one of those bold strokes, so peculiar to himself, which lifted his professional talent into absolute genius, and made him the uniformly successful detective that he was. He crossed the saloon, and standing beside the sleeping Chieftain

touched him roughly with one extended foot, while at the same moment he drew from his red shirt the flat black bottle, now almost empty.

Connolley wakened suddenly, and lifted his head. Seeing Podunk steadying himself, and clutching his bottle, he growled:

"What d'ye want?"

"Ter git out," whispered Podunk, with great show of mystery. "Open door, Mazhur."

Connolley sat up, casting the blanket from about his shoulders.

"Go back, you tipsy fool," he sharply said. "You can't go out."

"Ah'h, Mazhur," whispered Podunk, "mus' git out—want 'er filler-up." And he waved the bottle before the Regulator's face.

"Bah!" said Connolley, "'taint empty."

Podunk held up the bottle, shook it, and looked as if perplexed by the Regulator's argument. Then his countenance lighted up, he quickly uncorked the bottle, swallowed its contents at a gulp, and turned upon Connolley in triumph.

"'Tis zempty-now, Mazhur," he said solemnly.

"Well," retorted Connolley with a grin, "even if it is, *you're* full; so it's all right. Go back and settle down; if you don't I'll settle ye."

He drew the blanket about his shoulders, and resumed his former recumbent attitude.

For a moment Podunk regarded him with tipsy disapproval. Then he drew himself up with absurd dignity.

"Mazhur," he said slowly and emphasizing each word with a lurch as he retreated backward, "Mazhur—I—I'm—dish—dish—ap—pinted—in—yer!"

"Tis zempty now, Mazhur," he said solemnly.—Page 180

"Git away!" said Connolley, with a wave of the hand.

Podunk, seemingly quenched, went stumbling back to the inner room, where he sat down upon the nearest bench, and looked the picture of sleepy dejection.

In all his undertakings and disguises, this perfect comedian "abated not one jot of his character." And in this, as in the case with all perfect actors, lay the secret of his success. For some time he remained seated upon the bench, his chin sunk upon his breast, and his hand, with the bottle which it still clutched, half hidden in the folds of his shirt, as if he had fallen asleep in the act of concealing it.

He was sitting thus when Connolley, impelled by some second thought, came to the door and looked in; and he remained there for many moments after the Regulator, reassured, had again couched himself before the outer door, and had fallen asleep.

Then again, and with his former precautions, Podunk set out upon his tour of inspection, and this time he made the survey of Mack's premises undiscovered, and disturbing no one.

The building known as Mack's Theatre, and which served such varied uses, was built upon a corner, where two of Caledonia's principal streets crossed each other. It covered, together with the high, tight board fence which enclosed it upon two sides, a large plot of ground, and it was this expansiveness which first caused our friend Podunk to wonder, and to wish to investigate.

Without following each movement of the disguised detective in his rambling tour about the big building—for these movements from first to last were erratic, and in perfect keeping with his tipsy *role*—we will take a brief survey of Mack's

domain, in order the better to understand what is to occur in and about it.

Standing with its broad front facing eastward, and on one side—that on which was situated the saloon and gaming room and Mack's office—facing the south, and both bordering upon the two intersecting streets —Mack's was admirably fitted for the purpose which it served. The long, narrow room which was the Theatre proper, lay between the saloon and the apartments in the rear of it, and the wing in which was situated the *Cafe*, with its kitchens.

On the north, the premises were bounded by an unusually high and very tight board fence, which began at the rear corner of the *Cafe*, and extended around the west side of the oblong enclosure, terminating at Mack's office.

The stage was situated at the back of the long Theatre, with small and roughly finished dressing rooms above and below it. These dressing rooms, and the stage itself, were approached, first, through the saloon; next, through a long narrow passage, used also as a lumber room, from which steps narrow and steep led down to the rooms below, up to the stage, and still up, to the rooms above. Overhead in the Theatre was a low gallery, lined with dingy "boxes"; and over the saloon and gaming room was an extra bar, and a long apartment, open toward the stage, furnished with tables and chairs, and dignified by the name of Parlor.

Owing to the position of the Theatre, flanked as it was by saloon and offices on one side and *Cafe* and kitchens on the other, it was lighted by windows only at each end—or it might be said at one end and that the front, for the windows in the rear of the stage were shut off from the auditorium, and only served it as partial ventilators. Such other light and

ventilation as the auditorium received, reached it from above through slits of windows so high up and so narrow that they could not serve as outlooks, but only as places to admit air and light.

Our friend, Podunk, who looked for a reason for everything that struck him as peculiar, pondered a little over these windows.

"Queer arrangement," he said to himself. "Can't look out without climbing on a chair; couldn't *get* out if the house was on fire. I don't believe they're a foot wide."

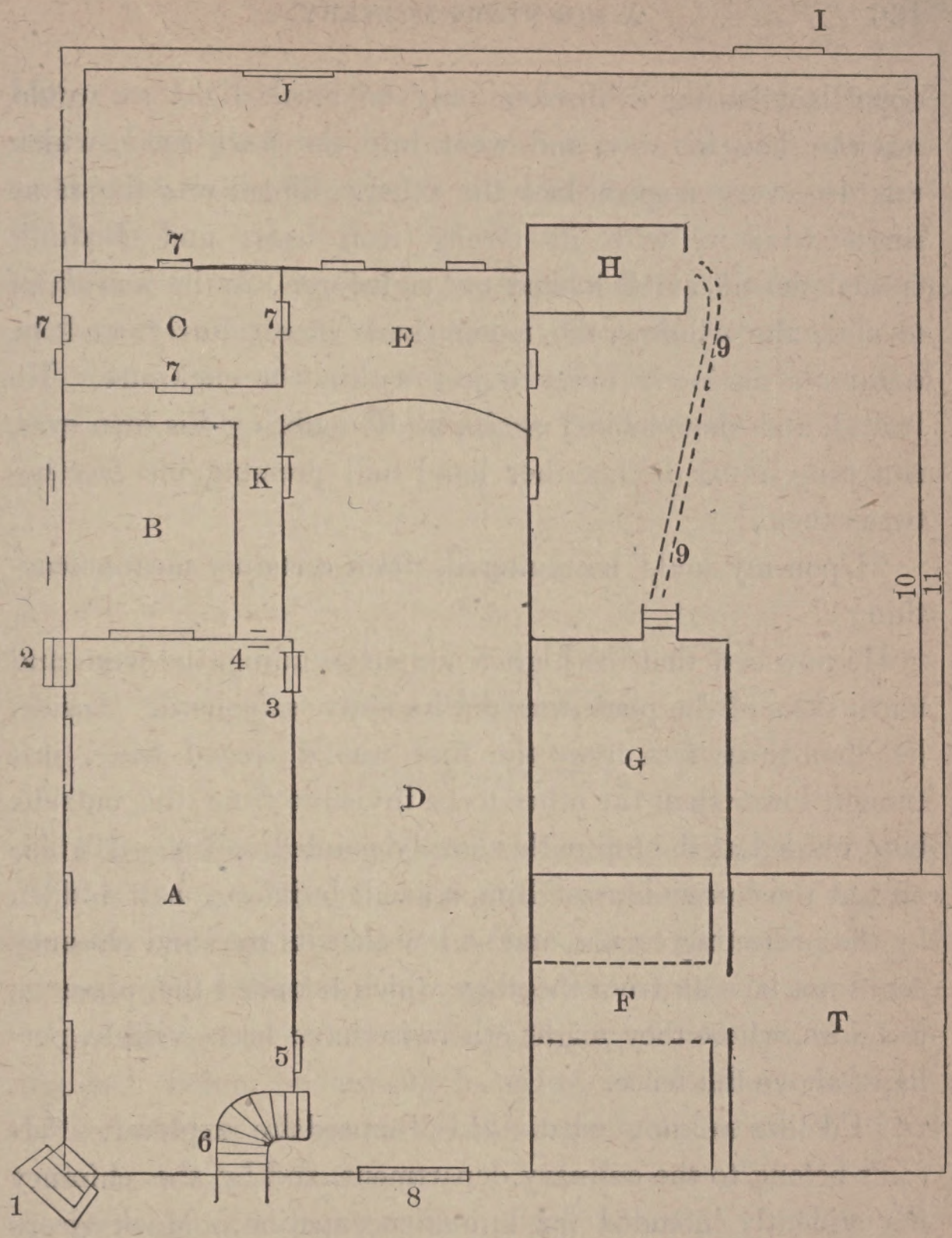
He passed on to the rear of the gallery, opened a door, and was in a narrow passage leading to the upper dressing rooms. He found nothing to interest him here, but noted that the one window in the small room was narrow like the others, but lower down, because the ceiling itself was within reach of his hand.

"A fine sweat box for Mack's fairies," he muttered, going to this narrow window and looking out.

The moon, which was now fast waning, was partly obscured by a cloud. But this passed quickly, and objects close at hand became dimly visible.

"Caution seems to be the rule here," he muttered. "Bars, as if it was a jail, and——" He started, pressed his face close to the window, and peered down into the enclosure at the back of the Theatre. Then, after a long survey, he opened the window, which was fastened only by a slender spring, and thrust his head out as far as three upright iron bars would let him. He could only press his forehead between the bars, and soon withdrew his head with a dissatisfied sniff.

He lighted the small lamp, which he had brought from the



A Mack's saloon.
B Gambling-room.
C Mack's private office.
D Theatre.
E Stage.
F Café.
G Kitchen.
H Isolated room.
I Outside gate.
J Inside gate.
K Passage to dressing-room and lumber-room.
T Public dining-room.
1, 2 Entrances to saloon.
3, 5 Doors connecting saloon and Theatre.
4 Door to passage.
6 Stairway to gallery and boxes.
7, 7, 7, 7 Doors to Mack's office.
8 Unused entrance to Theatre.
9 Path from kitchen to isolated room.
10 Inner fence.
11 Outer fence.

upper bar, letting it disclose only so much light as would serve to show his way, and went into the next room, which was in every respect like the other. There was the same single window, with its strong iron bars; and Podunk opened this also and looked out as before. As he was about to close the window, the moon shone more clearly, and he could see distinctly every object within the enclosure. He looked, and then looked again, as if doubting his own eyes, clutching a bar with either hand and pressing his face between them.

"Upon my soul," he muttered, "*that* certainly means something!"

He now saw that the high fence surrounding the west and north sides of the place was not its only safeguard. Inside, less than three feet from the first, was *a second fence*, just enough lower than the other to be invisible from the outside, but guarded at the top with sharply pointed spikes. He also saw, at the corner nearest him, a small building, half hidden by the projecting corner, and so low that its roof and chimney could not be seen from the alley which bounded the place on the sides, where they might otherwise have been visible, perhaps, above the fence.

"I'd like to know what *that* is," mused the explorer. "It can't belong to the culinary department, and by the chimney it's evidently intended for human occupation. Mack sleeps in his office, and his people, with the exception of Pop, sleep at the Boarding-house. I must see the other side."

He went back into the gallery, softly placed a small table under one of the high, narrow windows, and clambered up. The *Café* and kitchens underneath consisted of but one story, and these high windows, visible of course beyond the paling,

were not barred like those in the rear of the stage. Podunk opened the window softly, and thrust out his head; looked for a moment in the direction of the detached room, and then drew it in again.

"It's half underground," he muttered, "and it only touches the main building at the corner. They can't connect by any door, and the entrance must be on the west side. Umph! It isn't one o'clock yet; I'm going to get down there somehow."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WRONG MAN.

Podunk closed the window, replaced the table, and, taking up his lamp, went again into the close passage, from which a narrow staircase led down to the stage. Here, as above, he found all the windows opening to the west closely barred, and those facing northward too high for sight and too small for egress. Below, underneath the stage, he found only half windows to the west, and these well barred, while on the north side there was no opening.

Here again Podunk paused and pondered.

"Let's see," he muttered; "there's absolutely no connection between the Theatre and *Café*, and there's no way of getting outside from the stage or dressing rooms. If there's any entrance to that very private room down there, for it can't be more than a room, it must be—of course it *is*—through Mack's office."

Satisfied with his researches below, he again mounted the narrow stairs and cautiously entered the lumber room.

The sound of heavy breathing, near at hand, caused him to halt and hold the lamp high over his head. Then he smiled and hastily lowered it. He was standing in the sleeping apartment of Old Pop, the broken down actor, who lay in the long, lane-like room where Mack's stage carpenter bestowed all his superfluities, upon an improvised pallet which was ragged and dirty, and none too warm or soft. At the end of this portion of the lumber room, which formed an L, shutting in two sides of the gaming room, was a window, uncurtained, and through which the explorer could see the outlines of the buildings across the street.

"I must wait," he muttered; "the moon will soon be gone."

He looked about him, and finding a box upon which he could sit, he extinguished the light, lest Pop should waken and discover him too soon. So much had happened since his arrival in Caledonia that he had found no time for meditation, and he was not sorry for this opportunity, although he might have preferred a more comfortable resting place. But he had early learned the value of patience, and so he sat contentedly, thinking, and waiting for greater darkness.

He had resolved to make an attempt to see and talk with Vernet before daylight. He thought he knew how to reach him without discovery. So, when he believed the time had come, he again lighted the lamp, and, once assured that Pop was sleeping soundly, began to look about him. After peering around for some moments, he discovered a coil of rope which he thought fit for his purpose. It was so slender as to be almost a cord, but was strongly twined, and of considerable length.

"It will do," he muttered, and began to wind it about his waist, turning round and round as it uncoiled its length. Then he took up the lamp again, and once more drew forth the convenient black bottle. "Now for it," he said to himself, and going to the side of the sleeping man, laid a hand upon his shoulder.

Pop gaped, opened his eyes, and started up amazed.

"Hish, daddy," whispered Podunk.

The old man rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"Easy, daddy," Podunk again whispered.

"Easy yourself," grumbled the old man, who now recognized his recent acquaintance. "How did you get here?"

Podunk sat down on the side of the couch, and taking the bottle from under his arm presented it to the old man.

"Have some, daddy?" he said insinuatingly.

Pop's dull eyes brightened. He clutched at the bottle and raised it to his lips. Then his arm dropped, and he turned a disgusted countenance upon Podunk.

"It's empty," he growled.

"'Taint my fault, Pop," replied Podunk, taking possession of the bottle and carressing it. "*I* want ter fill it bad enough, but I can't git out."

"Umph," grunted Pop.

They were both silent for a moment and then Podunk whispered:

"Aint that a winder, daddy?"

"Yes."

"Look a here, now, 'spose I git out that winder, an' go to the crib up the street an' git this filled—eh?"

Pop shook his head.

"Come, Poppy," persisted his tempter, "'twouldn't take a

minit. Lor, now, I might a taken advantage of ye, and got out 'thout yer knowin' it; an' here ye're goin' back on me this way."

"You couldn't," said Pop with a grin. "You couldn't crowd past me, and get over all this rubbish, and open that window, without waking me, to save your life—not even if you was sober."

Podunk, who knew that all this was true, chose to ignore the argument, and only said: "Wal, aint I sober?"

"I guess not," replied the old man dryly; "not very."

"Anyhow, dad, I'm sober enough to git you an' me a rousin' drink, if you'll keep an eye out while I'm gone."

But Pop shook his head. "It wouldn't do," he said; and then cast a contemplative eye upon the bottle. "I 'spose," he began hesitatingly, "you wouldn't want *me* to go an' *you* keep an eye open?"

"I dunno—" Podunk was secretly delighted with this suggestion—"I—I'm 'fraid ye'd stay too long."

"No," said Pop, brightening at the prospect of a first pull at the bottle, "no; I'll come right back."

"I s'pose," said Podunk, still appearing to hesitate, "a feller would leave the winder open?"

"Yes," assented Pop eagerly.

"This is a danged skittish place ter be waitin' in. Say; if I sh'd hear any fuss, and think best to get back inter the Theatre, ye'd drink fair, wouldn't ye?"

"Yes, yes," Pop was growing every moment more thirsty and impatient.

"Wal," said Podunk, reluctantly handing over the bottle, "there ye air, an' there's the money. Good whiskey, daddy; and wag yer legs fast. I'm mighty dry."

Pop concealed the bottle about his person, and, clutching the money, moved toward the window.

"You'd better leave it up," he whispered; "it makes a good deal of noise. Just wait here, and be on the lookout to help me in."

Podunk raised the window with all possible caution; but in spite of his efforts to avoid noise it creaked dismally. For a few moments both listened intently, and then Pop began to scramble out.

"I'm all right," he whispered as he dropped to the ground.

And Podunk heard him move away in the darkness. He listened for a moment, and then, satisfied with the silence, he dropped, in his turn, from the window, and began to grope his way through the darkness, which had now grown dense, toward the west end of the building.

He had passed Mack's office, and knew that he had reached the corner, more by feeling than by sight, when he heard a movement close beside him, and some one whispered, almost in his ear:

"Is that you, Joe?" At the same moment he felt a hand touch the coil of rope wound about his body. "Oh, you've got the rope," the voice went on. "Is it all right?"

"All right," whispered Podunk, who now began to comprehend that here was a case of mistaken identity.

"Wal," whispered the voice, "let's be moving. The horses are there, and the boys all ready. It's time we had that blamed old Coroner out and on the zig-zag."

Podunk, who felt sure that his unknown companion was quite alone, and who was about to extricate himself from his present difficulty by the shortest and easiest route, now undoubled the fist which was all ready for a blow, and suddenly

changed his tactics. The Coroner named could mean none other than Doctor Mitchell, and Podunk decided at once to learn what was in store for him.

"Go on," he whispered.

"Keep close to the fence," whispered back the unknown. "Stop; git hold o' me somewhere. I know every inch of the way."

Podunk obediently laid a hand upon his sleeve, and they walked away from the corner, keeping their faces westward. They passed the few scattered buildings that lay between Mack's and the open prairie; and when they left the last behind, his conductor, who seemed a voluble fellow, said:

"It's a deuce of a long way round, but the old Cock would have it so; an' I guess it's jest as safe. You know the racket?"

"Why, yes," began Podunk; but the other went on whispering:

"Ye'd better undo that rope, and git it ready. I sh'd say, from the feel, there was enough an' more too. I don't b'leve, myself, that there's any need o' tyin' him, but Baldy says *tie:* so tie it'll be."

"You bet!" ventured Podunk fervently.

"Ye see the way the thing's fixed, now, one of us gits off easy. S'pose ye make it me, Joe? I'm blamed if I want ter cavort all over the prairie to-night. Say you'll go with the crowd, and let me stay and see that the way keeps clear —eh?"

"All right," whispered Podunk; "I aint particular."

"Good for you! Here's our horses. You'd best loosen yer rope, an' be ready to hand it over."

Podunk halted and began to uncoil the rope from about his

body. When he thought it about half reeled off, he drew a knife and cut it, leaving the remaining half still around his waist. At that moment his companion said:

"Hist! some one's follerin' us."

Instantly surmising that this some one was, probably, the *bona fide* "Joe," Podunk threw the rope toward his companion, and whispered back:

"Hold this and lay low; I'll settle him."

Then, without waiting for a reply, he hurried in the direction of the person who was tearing over the prairie at a brisk run. When the fellow was so near that he could hear his panting breath, Podunk, now fully determined to play the part of "Joe" to the end, threw himself at full length upon the ground. As he had hoped and expected, the runner stumbled and fell over his prostrate body. In a moment Podunk was astride the luckless tumbler, who felt something cold pressed against the back of his neck as he lay face downward.

"Stir or speak and you're a dead man," whispered Podunk sharply. "Stand back, boys," addressing an imaginary band. "Bill, help with the rope." While he spoke, he was rapidly uncoiling the rope from about his waist, keeping up, all the time, a constant movement and pressure of his feet and knees against the body and legs of his prisoner, intended to convey to the mind of that unfortunate the impression that he was being handled by several ruffians. The fellow was either drunk or an arrant coward, for he lay like one half stupified, quaking and trembling at every movement of his active assailant.

"Tie his hands behind him," suiting each action to the word. "Now, tie his feet; and a gag." Here he sacrificed

a huge red bandanna, which effectually stopped the fellow's mouth. "Now boys, he'll do for the present."

So saying, Podunk arose, and without another word to the bound and speechless victim, ran back to the place where he had left his strange companion and the horses. When he arrived at the spot, as nearly as he could locate it in the darkness, there was silence all around him. After listening a moment, he uttered a gentle, "Hist, Pard!"

"Here," answered a low voice some distance beyond him; "come this way."

Again, but with added caution, our adventurer went forward, and came upon his "Partner," whom he located by the movement of the horses.

"What's up?" queried Podunk in a harsh whisper.

"Up! Nothin', only your blamed horse nearly bust away from me. You must a hit him a touch when you threw me that rope; he just fairly drug me here. Who was it?"

"Who?" parried Podunk; "didn't ye hear?"

"Hear nothin'! How could I, with this danged critter? Get on, why don't ye? I've been hitchin' post long enough."

By this time Podunk had managed to discover which animal was supposed to be his, and mounted, saying:

"Lead on; we're losin' time. 'Twant nothin' but somebody's horse broke loose."

"Umph," returned the other, "I guess we shan't keep 'em waitin' very long. It takes a little time if it *ain't* fur, when you've got that kind of a passenger. An' they wouldn't budge, of course, till it was good an' dark. Lord, if the stars aint comin' out! I kin most see Blue Jane's head. Wal, I guess you won't mind—ye'll need a little light when ye cross the duck pond: and he'll have ter be blindfolded. anyhow."

"Stir or speak, and you are a dead man!"—Page 193.

"'He', whoever he is, won't be much worse off than I am," reflected Podunk. "What precious mystery am I running my neck into now?"

But he rode sturdily on beside his guide, resolved to face the issue. For some time they journeyed in silence and then his guide halted.

"Here we are," he said; "just outside the timber. Nobody here either; well—"

"Hist", said Podunk; "I hear something."

"Yes; they're coming."

They rode forward until they were a few feet from the advancing horsemen, four in number; and then they halted and the guide said:

"What's the word?'

"Ready," replied the foremost horsemen; "and you?"

"Ready, too."

"Where's Joe?"

"Here."

"All right. Face about, boys."

They turned their horses' heads, and riding two by two, with Podunk and his companion bringing up the rear, they journeyed southward. The stars came out brighter now, and they could just distinguish each other through the gloom. But it was impossible to recognize form or features, and Podunk felt, for the time, quite secure. They seemed to be skirting the town, and gradually drawing nearer it. Finally the leader drew rein, and Podunk knew, by a glimmering light just beyond, that they were close to some habitation.

"Dismount, boys," whispered the man who acted as leader. "Who has the rope?"

"Here," said Podunk's companion. "Joe 'tended to that."

"All right; hand it over. Joe, you stay with the horses. Here—" he took something from his pocket, and began to distribute long strips of sable crape—"tie on the masks, boys. Dick, the old man must have your horse; everything appears safe, so you can meet us at the crossing. All ready, boys?"

There was a general assent, and five masked men walked silently, in Indian file, toward the glimmering light, leaving Podunk, his face concealed by a crape mask, holding their horses for robbers, murderers, Regulators—which he could not guess.

"I'd very much like to know what I'm here for," he muttered. And then, with a low chuckle, "I wish I could see Van, now. I'd hold him up. I feel like a ten horse-power highwayman," said to himself this irrepressible adventurer.

CHAPTER XXII.

PODUNK UNMASKS.

The masked men, each seeming perfectly to understand the part allotted him, walked silently toward the cottage from which the glimmering light shone out. Then one of their number went straight to the door, while the others slunk into the darkness on either side. There was a moment of silence, and then the mask at the door rapped loudly.

"Who's there?" called a voice from within. There was a note of impatience, but no hint of fear, in the tone.

"You're wanted, Doctor,"—Podunk could plainly hear the speaker without—"There's a badly hurt man hard by. Come quick; I've got a horse in waiting."

In another moment the door of the cottage was flung open, and Doctor Mitchell, his hat far back upon his head, and one hand in his pocket, stood upon the threshold. The mask who had summoned him retreated into the shadow, and the Doctor could only dimly discern his figure.

"What's the matter?" he asked with his usual professional abruptness.

"An accident; bring your instruments, Doctor, and hurry; time's precious."

"All right." The door closed with a bang, opened again in a moment, and the Doctor came out, shutting and locking his door behind him.

"Where are you?" he said, stepping briskly down the two wooden steps; "and where do we ride?"

There was no answer in words, but strong hands seized him before and behind; by the arms, by the legs, by the throat.

"Don't make a noise, Doctor," the spokesman said. "You're perfectly safe so long as you keep still. This business must be on the quiet; and if you are taken by force, and don't know where you go, it will save us the trouble of swearing you to secrecy. It's your professional services that we want, not your money or your life."

"Umph!" grunted the Doctor behind the big hand that covered his mouth.

They had reached the horses by this time, and his captors halted.

"Now, Doctor, we'll blindfold you, and I may as well say

that the first sound you make, or the first attempt to resist, will be at your peril."

"Umph!" grunted the Doctor again.

"Joe," said the leader, "bring up that horse."

Podunk obediently led forward the animal destined for the Doctor's use.

"Now that you are blinded, Doctor, we must tie your hands—not from fear that you'll turn them against us, but to prevent your tampering with your spectacles."

The Doctor grunted again, and then, as the man who held a hand over his mouth withdrew it momentarily, he shot out the question:

"Are you going to tie up my tongue, too?"

"Not if you promise to use it mildly."

"Well, leave that free; that's all I ask. I'd rather promise to keep quiet than have one of your confounded dirty rags tied under my nose."

His captors indulged in a suppressed laugh at this sally, and the Doctor's mouth was respected. They lifted him upon the horse which Podunk still held by the bit, and the word was given:

"Mount. Here, Joe, you ride on the other side of the Doctor. I'll lead; follow, men."

Podunk, who owed his post of honor to his proximity, mounted his horse—or Joe's horse—and rode away beside the Doctor, fully assured now that in this adventure he was, after all, not out of place, and determined to see Doctor Mitchell safely through it.

When they had ridden for some time in silence, the leader said:

"Doctor, I'm sorry I can't render your ride more agree-

able. If you'll take a pull at my flask, I'll hold it for you."

The Doctor, who was riding, with his hands lashed behind him, as firm and erect as a grenadier, gave utterance to his favorite expression of contempt.

"Umph! I'm afraid your stock of politeness won't hold out, my friend, if you draw on it too heavily. You'll need your flask to keep up your courage. I don't feed mine on whiskey."

The leader withdrew into himself, and Podunk indulged in a low chuckle. It was evident that, whatever was in store for him, Doctor Mitchell felt not one thrill of fear; and equally evident that his temper was roused. Podunk rejoiced in his contemptuous attitude, and his display of pluck.

There was now scarcely a cloud to obscure the sky, and all the stars were shining brightly. They could see their horses' heads, and dimly distinguish objects about them. It seemed to Podunk that they must be riding in a circle, and encompassing the town at a very respectful distance. Before long he was certain that this was the case. They were not going away from Caledonia, but riding over the prairie in a wide circuit.

Presently the leader spoke again.

"Doctor, we have a smooth road just ahead, and some of our way is rough; can you stand a faster gait?"

"I can't travel too fast in my present company," retorted the Doctor.

The horses were put to a round trot, the sturdy old man riding like a centaur. After travelling in this manner for some time, the leader called over his shoulder: "Steady, men."

The horses were brought to a walk, and Podunk could see the gleam of water ahead.

"A bad place," the leader muttered, as if to himself, but loud enough to reach the Doctor's ear. "Now, follow me. Joe, fall in behind."

He shortened the halter of the led horse, and rode slowly toward the water, the hoofs of the animals sinking deep into into the mud, and coming out with a hissing sound. It was a pool—the same, in fact, in which Mountain Mag had thrown the handkerchief with its treasure so shortly before—and Podunk, now convinced that the masked men were making this *detour* to mislead the Doctor, was not surprised to see the remaining horsemen turn aside and ride slowly around the pool. Obedient to instructions, however, he urged his horse forward, taking care to follow the leader, and rode splashing through the mud and water, knowing that, as had been intended, the noise made by the three horses would conceal from the Doctor the fact that the others were riding dry-shod.

Again they quickened their pace, and after making numerous feints calculated to mislead their prisoner, and skirting the town on the east and north, they began to close in, until they arrived at a point on the open prairie almost in the rear of Mack's, and not more than eighty rods from the place where Podunk had left his bound and gagged other self.

Here they halted, the leader giving his orders in quick under-tones, and the men obeying him promptly. Two of the men dismounted, and lifted Doctor Mitchell from his horse, and the leader, flinging his bridle to Podunk, said:

"Hold my horse, Joe. No; give him to Tom and come with us. Boys, perfect quiet, mind, and don't stir from this spot. Who's got the Doctor's case?"

"Here," said one of the men.

"Fetch it along, Joe. Now, forward, and softly."

They went forward, the leader linking his arm within that of Doctor Mitchell, who strode along, grim and silent, until, to the unbounded surprise of Podunk, they had passed in the rear of the scattered buildings and were close to the high fence directly back of Mack's Theatre.

Here there was another halt.

"Give me the case, Joe," whispered the leader; "and do you keep a watch on the south end. Bob, you look to the north. Go ahead, Mike, and see if the way is open."

The man called Mike glided away, and was back quickly.

"All right," he whispered.

"Come on, then. Doctor, I assure you—"

"Oh, get this business over," snarled the Doctor. "*Your* assurances, indeed."

As they moved forward, the fellow addressed as Bob walked away in the direction indicated by his leader as his watch; and Podunk feeling tolerably sure that no harm was intended Doctor Mitchell, but anxious to learn all that he could without betraying himself, crept after the party, unnoticed in the darkness.

They went straight to the high fence, and Podunk was so close that he could see what appeared to be a gate, swing inward without noise. All then passed through, and the aperture was closed. Instantly, Podunk was close to the fence, his ear laid against the boards. But he heard no sound. Minutes passed, and the stillness was unbroken.

"There must be a gate here," he thought; "a blind entrance! a blind entrance! and—why, of course, there is another gate in that second fence. If Van were only here to give me a shoulder, I'd show my friend Mack that his fortress was not inaccessible."

It seemed a very long time that he waited there in the darkness and silence, his ear always on the alert, and keeping close to the place where the Masks and their prisoner had entered. In reality it was but half an hour, and then a slight sound warned him of an approach from within. He glided silently toward the south corner, but stopped before he had gone far, and saw three shadowy forms emerging from the concealed gateway.

Then there was a low clear whistle. Podunk, rightly judging that this was the signal to call in the guards, crept softly after the party now walking briskly toward the spot where they had left the horses. When they had reached the place, and again halted, the leader asked:

"Are we all here? Bob? Joe?"

By this time both pickets were near enough to answer to their names. Then the word was given to mount; and, in the order in which they came, they rode away, making the same wide *detour*, splashing again through the pool, which Podunk now judged to be the "duck pond" referred to by the Mask who had pressed him into this service.

After crossing the "duck pond," they took a new course and rode straight away from the town, and toward the timber to the south-west. When they had gone fully three miles, there was another halt, and the leader said to the two men in the rear:

"Ride forward, boys. Bob, hold the Doctor's horse. Joe, come here."

In a moment Podunk and the three Masks were a couple of rods away from the Doctor and Bob, and then the leader said in a guarded tone:

"Which one of you boys will take the Doctor back to town?"

"I thought Bob was—" began one, in a discontented tone.

"I don't think it's safe to send Bob; he's too fond of talking; which—"

"I'll go," said Podunk, but as if he were not at all anxious.

"Very well, Joe," said the leader. "Take the old man around to his own cottage, or as near as is safe. Then dismount him, cut his cords, and gallop away like the wind. Wait; don't take off his blind; and don't let the old Turk rile you, or set you talking."

"All right," replied Podunk.

And then he, with the leader, rode back. The exchange was made and Podunk took the Doctor's bridle and turned the horse's head townward. No word was spoken as they rode away, but Podunk knew that the party was standing still, listening and waiting until he, with his prisoner, was out of hearing.

For fully half a mile they rode in perfect silence. Then the Doctor spoke sharply.

"Where are the rest of you?"

"Gone, Doctor. They've forsook us."

"Eh!" evidently the Doctor detected something familiar in the voice, which Podunk now made no attempt to disguise.

"I say they've gone. Whoa!" He reined his horse close to that ridden by Doctor Mitchell, and leaning over in the saddle, cut the cords that bound his hands. "There," he said with a chuckle, "now, Doc, jest yank off that blind, and I guess ye'll be more comfortable."

The Doctor jerked off the bandage, turned in his saddle, and tried to peer through the gloom at his singular companion.

"Who are you?" he asked abruptly,

"Ye've been callin' me Podunk of late. If ye'll jest take

me on trust awhile, ye'll understand. I've got a little somethin' to do, an' when that's done, we'll talk. I want ye to go 'long with me, 'cause then you'll be sure that what I'm goin' to tell ye later is truth."

"Go on," said the Doctor; "I'm bound to see this thing through."

"So'm I," said Podunk, and for some time they rode on in silence.

When they again made a halt, it was near the place where the latter had left his bound and helpless prisoner, the *bona fide* "Joe."

"Now, Doc," said Podunk, "jest hold my nag for a minit."

He dismounted, went forward gropingly, and soon found his man, who had not succeeded in loosening his bonds or removing the gag.

"Oh, here you are," said Podunk, and went at once back to the Doctor. "Jest let me lead ye up," he said, and taking the horses by the bit, he suited the action to the word. Then he said: "I've got a man here. Git down an' take a look at him. I want ye ter see another neat job of tyin' an' gaggin'."

Doctor Mitchell slipped off his horse, and bent over the figure, which he could dimly see stretched upon the ground. He ran his hand over the face, and felt of the fettered feet and hands.

"Umph," he grunted, and turned away.

"Hist!" Podunk laid a hand upon his shoulder and whispered in his ear. "We must take a look at him, but we mustn't take off the bandage from his eyes."

He took from his pocket a handful of matches, and, lighting one, held it close to the fellow's face. Then, and this the Doctor thought odd, he lighted another and seemed to examine

the clothing; and still another, by which he surveyed his prisoner's hands and feet. Then he whispered:

"Mount, Doc, and be ready to ride in a minit."

The Doctor clambered into the saddle, and Podunk turned again to the prostrate man.

"Hark, friend Joe," he said abruptly, "you think you're in a bad boat; but if you do what I tell you, you're all right. I've rid yer nag an' played yer part, an' it's all square. You'll find these horses tied to the first post ye come to when ye go into town. All *you've* got to do, is to take 'em, an' go back ter yer gang, an' tell 'em that ye left the old man hard by his own door. And mind, if ye *don't* do this, it'll turn out very bad for ye, all 'round. Another thing: don't try ter foller or come any dodges, or ye'll turn out wus yet, an' yer friends won't have anything ter do but bury ye. I'm going ter cut yer hands loose, and arter I do it, ye must set right here till ye kin count a hundred. Then go ahead, but *remember*."

He finished this harangue with two quick slashes of his knife, sprang upon his horse, and, seizing the Doctor's bridle, galloped away.

"We'll tie the nags to the first post," Podunk said; and no other word passed between them until the horses were tethered, and then the Doctor said:

"Now, my friend, will you tell me what this means?"

"Come across the street," said Podunk; "Joe'll soon be along after his horses."

They crossed the street, and stood a little in the rear of Mack's once more.

"Now," whispered Podunk, "I'll tell ye enough to let ye see how the land lays—we can't stay here long. I got out of

one of Mack's windows when the Regulators was asleep, 'cause I had a little private business that I had been neglectin', an' the first thing, I run into that feller they called Bob; an' *he* took me, in the dark, for this ere *Joe*—dy'e see?"

"Umph!" grunted the Doctor. "Come along to my house,"—taking his companion by the arm. "We can talk over this affair there. What have you got?"—his hand touching something underneath Podunk's elbow.

"Your case, Doc."

"Well, upon my word! How did you carry it?"

"Oh, easy; at the pommel. But, Doc, look a here—I'll be missed at Mack's purty soon, if I ain't already."

"Confound it," snapped the Doctor, "I must have an understanding with you somehow, before you go on that jury again."

"Wal, there needn't be any trouble about *that*," replied Podunk serenely. "Connolley thinks I was purty drunk last night. If you jest go around to the saloon door, an' raise a thunderin' racket, an' call Connolley out, an' tell him you found me ramblin' round loose an' took me in, an' guess you'd better keep me till I sober up an' then you'll bring me along to the inquest all right; an' if ye touch the Captain up a little about his cussed carelessness—I guess it'll do the business, eh?"

"Umph!" sniffed the Doctor. After a moment's silence: "I don't see any other way. And you?"

"Oh, I'll wait right here."

In a few moments Doctor Mitchell was battering furiously at the door of Mack's saloon.

"Who's there?" called a voice which he recognized as Connolley's.

"Doctor Mitchell. Open, Connolley."

The door was hurriedly opened, and Connolley and two or three half-awakened Regulators saw Doctor Mitchell frowning upon the threshold.

"Where's that fellow Podunk?" he asked sharply.

"Podunk?" Connolley pointed toward the inner room. "He's there, and drunk as a lord."

"Are you sure?" the Doctor asked scornfully. Then changing his tone: "Don't trouble yourself to look, Connolley. I don't wonder the stage-robbers escape you. Podunk is in my care. I suppose he clambered out of some window. As he seemed too drunk to travel far, I took him, and I'll keep him at my office until the inquest opens. I only called to save a hullabullo when he came to be missed." And the Doctor turned and strode away.

When they were, at last, in his cottage, with the door closed and securely bolted, Doctor Mitchell lighted a large lamp, and turning its full glare upon our adventurer, said:

"Now, then, you that call yourself Podunk, what the mischief *are* you?"

Podunk took off his old slouch hat and said, without any trace of his former dialect and nasal twang:

"I'm a detective, Doctor, and the friend of Van Vernet. My name is Dick Stanhope."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A COUNCIL OF THREE.

When Doctor Mitchell had recovered somewhat from the surprise occasioned by this new development, he became at once hospitable, and practical.

"Sit down," he said, "and make yourself as comfortable as you can. I have some half decent wine, and can scare up something in the way of luncheon. I don't know how you feel, but I'm hungry."

"So am I," said Podunk.

In a short time they were seated at the Doctor's table, one end of which was piled high with books, pamphlets, papers, knives, scissors, pens, bottles,—the usual *debris* accumulated by a disorderly bachelor—the other end being cleared, for the time, to make room for the Doctor's bread and cheese and canned meats.

"Now, Mr. Stanhope," said Doctor Mitchell, "in the name of all that's wonderful, how came you with that gang to-night? Tell me that first, and the rest as you please."

"Doctor," said Stanhope, setting down an empty glass, which his host at once refilled, "have you any idea where you have been to-night?"

"Not the slightest. But I'm consumed with a desire to know."

"And I," said Stanhope, "am consumed with a desire to know what you saw, and what you did, when you reached that very secret place. Remember, I was left on guard outside and have no idea of what was transpiring within."

"Well," said the Doctor, "my story is not long; you shall have it first. After I was taken off my horse, I was led to a place where we seemed to pass through some sort of opening—"

"A gate."

"Was it a gate? Well, next came something that seemed to me like a narrow passage, for my two conductors pressed close to me, as we went through it, and apparently brushed against a wall on either side. Then came another gate—*was* it a gate?"

"I think so."

"Well, next we went forward a few paces, and then one of my guides said: 'Step down three steps.'"

"Ah, I thought so!"

"Oh, you did? Well, I stepped down, and I heard a door open; was pushed forward, and knew that I was in some sort of a room. My guides released their hold upon my arms, and I heard whispering near me. Then they began to untie me, and last they took the bandage from my eyes. What do you think I saw?"

"I give it up."

"A small room, furnished like a sleeping room, luxuriously furnished, and, standing between me and the bed, six men wearing masks, and long black gowns that entirely concealed their figures. What do you think I did?"

"Said grace?"

"No, sir; I *laughed* as loud as I could roar. It struck me

as exceedingly droll. I had seen much the same thing on the stage."

"Quite appropriate," murmured Stanhope.

"Eh?"

"Nothing; go on, Doctor."

"Evidently they were not pleased with my hilarity. They fell back, and then I saw a seventh man stretched upon the bed. He was covered to the waist, but his body, clothed in a grey flannel shirt, was exposed. His face was hidden by a crape mask, like the others, and a silk cap was pulled tight down over his head. A lot of straggling, grizzly whiskers stuck down from under the mask. The spokesman of our party made known to me that this was my patient, and I went straight to business. The fellow had a bullet in his shoulder."

Stanhope started, seemed about to speak, then checked himself and said only, "Go on."

"It was an ugly wound. But I probed and dressed it, and gave directions for further treatment. The fellow must have suffered horribly, but he did not so much as groan. The men never spoke one unnecessary word, and neither did I. I told them the man was in no danger so long as he was properly cared for, and politely requested them to escort me back to my cottage. Then one of them thanked me and put fifty dollars into my hand,"—here the Doctor's eyes twinkled. "What do you think I did with it?"

"Put it in your pocket, of course."

"Correct; and here it is." He took out the money and placed it upon the table. "Well, that's about all. They bound and blindfolded me as before, and we went back as we came. Now, *where* was I?"

"In a small room directly back of Mack's Theatre, and inside his high fence."

"*No!*"

"*I* say *yes!* Listen."

Stanhope began with his exploration of the Theatre; told of his discovery of the barred windows, the double fence, and the isolated room; described the ruse by which he had convinced Connolley of his intoxication and furnished a reason for his absence, should he be missed; how he afterward disposed of old Pop, and made good his exit from the building; relating then, in detail, the story of his adventure with the masked gang, from the moment when he fell into the hands of the fellow, Bob, up to the time when he had been given charge of the Doctor. When all was told they sat silent for some moments, and then the Doctor arose and said:

"We might talk till daylight but it is not wise. How much sleep have you had of late?"

"About four hours out of forty-eight, I should say."

"That won't do. Did you know that your friend Vernet was to meet me here at eight o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Well, I won't ask *how* you knew, but all this must be told over again for his benefit."

"Of course."

"Now that I have found out where I was, I can wait for the rest. I'm not so much surprised as you may imagine. My bed is at your disposal; you can get a couple of hours sleep yet, and so can I—I shall lie on this lounge."

Stanhope, who knew the wisdom of this proposition, accepted it without demur, and soon all was quiet in the Doctor's cottage, and two tired men were fast asleep.

Stanhope, who had charged his mind with nothing, slept on long after Doctor Mitchell, who had resolved to rise early, and who had not lost so many hours sleep, was awake and quietly astir.

The Doctor made coffee and prepared a bachelor breakfast, and then sat down and smoked an ugly Dutch pipe, pondering all the while and making notes now and then on a slip of paper. Finally he consulted his watch, and finding that it was half-past seven, he breakfasted without arousing Stanhope; and then put the coffee over the little brazen furnace upon which it had been boiled, to keep it hot. While in the act, he heard the approaching footsteps of his visitor and hastened to open the door, lest a knock should wakenStanhope.

"Good morning, Doctor," said Vernet, with his usual easy courtesy. "You see I am punctual."

His host put up a warning finger.

"Speak low," he said softly, "and come in." Then when Vernet was in the room, he closed the door and added, "Now come and see whom I've got here."

He pushed open the door of his small bed room and beckoned Vernet forward, the latter exclaiming, after one glance, "Why, it's that fellow Podunk!"

"Umph!" said the Doctor. And then, when he had closed the door: "Just as you like, young man; Podunk or Stanhope."

"Oh! so you've found him out?"

"Not I; he introduced himself. Sit down, Vernet, and I'll tell you all about it."

"Well," said Vernet, when the adventures of the night had been recounted, "Dick Stanhope is the luckiest fellow alive. He always comes out right side up."

"I can believe you. But now I'm burning to know what brought this same Stanhope to Caledonia. and how he came to be figuring as a miner."

"That I may as well tell you. I sent for Dick; and a certain Mr. Follingsbee, whom you may have heard named before—"

"Why, that's Miss Wray's friend—the lawyer!"

"Precisely. Well, this Mr. Follingsbee, learning that Dick was coming West, persuaded him to act as escort to a young lady."

"Oh!"

"He accepted the proposition, for Dick, although he pretends to be bashful, is rather fond of the ladies."

"And the ladies fond of him, I'll be sworn."

"Well, perhaps, for Dick's a good-looking fellow when he's himself. It happened, however, that just at this point, and before he had been presented to his fair traveling companion, he received a letter from me advising him to conceal his identity. This disarranged his plans, and the result was that Miss Wray came to Caledonia escorted by an elderly person, who forgot to tell his name, instead of by Mr. Richard Stanhope."

"And Stanhope?"

"Well," with a broad smile, "he came at about the same time."

"Look here, Vernet," said the Doctor eagerly, "do you mean to say—is it possible that that stranger—that missing stranger—was Stanhope?"

"Ask him, Doctor;" answered Vernet, still smiling, "he'll tell you."

"Yes," said a voice directly behind them, "I'll tell anything that Vernet has left me to tell."

"Why, Dick," cried Vernet, springing up and seizing his friend's hand, "did we wake you?"

"No," answered Stanhope. "I dreamed that some one fired on me from the top of a stage coach, and hit me in the shoulder; that the Doctor, here, dressed the wound, and that he wanted to find out if my whiskers were false, and pulled them so hard that I woke."

"Umph!" grunted the Doctor, "I wish you had given me that hint last night."

"Why?" asked Stanhope, as he exchanged glances with Vernet.

"Because I would have tried it. I believe that wounded fellow did wear a false beard."

"It's very probable," said Vernet.

The Doctor then hastened to place the coffee upon the table, and served Stanhope with a comfortable breakfast—the three keeping the conversation moving, and the Doctor persistently questioning, until he heard all the story of Stanhope's adventures since his arrival in Caledonia.

"And you were actually under that bed all the time?" queried the Doctor, in surprise. "You heard all that was said by Mack, and Connolley, and all of us?"

"Every word. I heard you say—" with an affectation of offended dignity—"that I couldn't reason from cause to effect; that I couldn't put two and two together."

"I'll take it back. I did suspect you at first, but you fooled me completely. Have you done? Then let's talk business. We have a good many points to settle."

"All right," said Stanhope, pushing back his chair. "Van, I haven't seen a good cigar since I landed.'

Vernet took the hint, and proffered his cigar case.

"To begin," said Doctor Mitchell, "Mr. Vernet, what do you think of last night's business?"

"I hardly know. Do the Regulators ever do things in this style?"

"Never; and between you and me, they don't see real service enough to get a shot in the shoulder."

"I don't mean that, exactly. Is it not possible that one of them may have engaged in some affray, more or less disreputable, and that Mack, who seems to be a sort of patron saint over them, has taken this melodramatic way to help him out."

"No; it is not likely."

"Well, frankly, I don't think it is, myself. But, Doctor, have you no theory?"

"I had not thought of it before, I confess, but this young man, Podunk, has made a shrewd suggestion. May it not have been the robber that you shot the night before last?"

Vernet lifted his eyebrows. "At Mack's?" he said.

"Umph! you know what I think of Mack, don't you?"

"You don't like him, and you suspect him. Anything more?"

"Umph!" was the Doctor's only response.

"Doctor," broke in Stanhope, "how long will it be, at the shortest, before that fellow will be able to leave Mack's suburban villa?"

"A week."

"Well, then, as no great harm was done to either of us, and as good may come of it, suppose we just drop this business until Vernet and I make some investigations?"

"Oh, you want to drop me out of the affair, do you, Mr. Detective?"

"By no means, only—"

"Tell us your idea, Dick," interrupted Vernet, who delighted in making his friend show himself at his best.

"Why, it's simple enough. The first thing would be to find if some one has been hurt in any saloon fight, or any thing of that sort. If we find that no such affair has happened—by the way, Doctor, how old was that wound?"

The Doctor started, and rested an approving eye upon the questioner.

"By Jove, you are a practical fellow," he exclaimed. "The wound—I didn't think much of it before—was all of twenty hours old."

"Oh!" said Stanhope, and again exchanged glances with Vernet. "Now, don't you see, we have a week in which to find out whether this man is the fellow that Vernet shot, or some one else who has a reason for keeping shady. Within that week, too, we may be able to locate Mack. It's plain that he's no friend to doctors, and it's equally plain that he has great influence among the Caledonians. If Mack is resolved to persecute Dalton, and it looks as if he meant mischief, we've got to get a grip on him somewhere, and I think, between us, we've made a good beginning. Dalton's affairs demand our first attention, and a good deal of it. I should like to know what *you* think of his case, Doctor."

"Well, I'll tell you," said the Doctor grimly. "Of course you must see that this inquest business is a mere farce, a form, but one that Caledonians think much of. They've made up their minds beforehand that Dalton's guilty. They fully expect and intend that a verdict of guilty shall be rendered."

"You say 'they', Doctor," broke in Vernet. "Now, who—"

"They," interrupted the Doctor in his turn, "means the

majority—the men who are led by Mack and others like him; the birds of a feather who help to make the town the Pandemonium it is. In a civilized community, the business men, the butchers and bakers and merchants and mechanics, would have a vote and an interest in seeing affairs of justice rightly conducted. *Here* the business men come to make money, and these lawless characters are their best sustainers. A man who offends this crowd can't do business here long; so they keep out of the way, and the town is run by hoodlums."

"Well," said Vernet, "what follows?"

"This follows: If that jury brings a verdict of guilty against Philip Dalton to-night, he'll be in the hands of the lynchers before morning."

"Then they must *not* bring in such a verdict," said Vernet firmly.

"Ah! I wish it could be prevented."

"It shall be prevented," declared Stanhope.

"But how? And by whom?"

"By us; all three—you, Doctor, principally."

"Do you see a chance, a possibility? Can anything be brought forward to counterbalance all this circumstantial evidence?"

Stanhope jerked his chair near the two men opposite him, and lifted a finger to emphasize his words.

"We've got to sink the detective for a little while, and turn lawyer. If we can't convince my honorable constituents that Dalton is innocent, we must place the evidence in such a light that they can't consistently declare him guilty."

"Umph!" grunted the Doctor, "that *is* lawyer's work."

"I wonder," said Vernet meaningly, "if any of these jurymen can be bought."

"Oh!" cried Stanhope, with an encouraging nod, "*you'll* pass for a lawyer, Van; nothing amateurish about *that!* Now, we have only an hour to arrange our batteries. Doctor, are you going to put that fellow Monckton on the stand?"

"Yes."

"And Cool Hank?"

"He can't be found."

"Good; I hope he can't. Now, gentlemen, listen to my plan for the defense."

And they did listen—asking questions, making suggestions, taking notes by the way.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MOUNTAIN MAG'S "CONTEMPT OF COURT."

A little before the time appointed for the reopening of the inquest, Doctor Mitchell appeared at Mack's, grim and taciturn, and with him came Podunk, the latter presenting a faithful picture of a man just recovering from an all-night spree.

"Well, sir," began Connolley with a frown, "I'd like to know what you mean—"

But the Doctor broke in with scant ceremony.

"Don't bully the fellow, Connolley; he's not more than

half sobered yet. Besides, I've talked at him enough, trying to learn how he got out of the place."

"Oh, that's easy told," said the Regulator. "I found old Pop's window, the one in the lumber room where he sleeps, wide open, and Pop drunk as a lord. Of course, Mr. Podunk got out there—didn't you, eh?"

Podunk, who had listened to the Regulator's remarks as if they concerned some very reprehensible person in whom he was not interested, winked, and grinned, and shuffled away.

"What had the old man to say about it?" asked the Doctor, who knew that Stanhope did not wish to get Pop into trouble.

"He? Oh, he was too drunk to say anything. If he hadn't been drunk, the chap never'd a got past him, and out o' that window, without waking him."

"Umph!" sniffed the Doctor, who found this single ejaculation very useful. Then he turned away, satisfied that Pop had reduced himself to a condition of irresponsibility by freely absorbing the contents of Podunk's re-filled bottle, precisely as that genius had expected him to do.

The body of Selwyn had been removed to Mack's office, and there prepared for burial. The jury were all in their places, and the Regulators in theirs. And before the Coroner opened the examination, most of the witnesses had arrived. Among them were two who had not before appeared—the first being the man Monckton; and the second a small, thin man, with pale face, piercing black eyes, and dressed like a priest.

Philip Dalton came early and alone; quiet and pale, but perfectly self-possessed. Aileen Lorne also came alone, walking with quick, elastic step, head erect, and closely veiled. But "Rosabella Saint Leger" had found friends; she came fluttering in with Florine and Aubrey, Kit Duncan and Tony

"Well, sir, I'd like to know what you mean—"—Page 219.

Rowe—the whole party wearing the air of visitors at a fair or museum.

Van Vernet was among the last to arrive, and he escorted Miss Wray and Mountain Mag.

Doctor Mitchell—who was outwardly severe of aspect, and within, as the result of his conference with the two detectives, tolerably confident—was about to resume his official dignity, when Connolley pulled his sleeve.

"What now, Connolley?" he asked impatiently. "It's time to begin."

"I know it, Doctor,"—Connolley was not so assured as usual; he had pondered much, during the night, upon the Doctor's words, and the result was a feeling of uncertainty and uneasiness. "But the fact is, Mack and some others have been talking, and they wanted me to tell ye that ye ought, in all fairness, to look into this jealousy business."

"Jealousy, eh? And where am I to look?"

"Well, they say that the cause of the quarrel atween Selwyn and Dalton was jealousy about Aileen Lorne; an' that it was because Selwyn was coming in ahead that Dalton fired on him. An' they want you to question the gal, an' get the truth out of her."

"Umph! Look here, Connolley, did Mack tell you to come and say this?"

Connolley dropped his eyes. "Yes; Mack an' the others."

"What others?"

Connolley looked up and brightened perceptibly. "Wal, sir, one or two of my Regulators are among the others."

Out came the Doctor's note-book.

"Name them," he said sharply.

"Why, I don't see any need—"

"Don't argue! If I put Miss Lorne on the stand, I must know upon whose authority; name your men."

"Why, Pete Finlayson was one."

Down went the name of Pete Finlayson.

"And Hedley."

"Oh, Hedley! Any more?"

"N—No."

"Except yourself—eh, Connolley?" said the Doctor, slapping shut his note-book.

The Doctor was troubled. It was no part of his programme to put Aileen Lorne forward again as a witness. But he knew that all reasonable demands must be complied with, and could give no satisfactory excuse for not recalling Miss Lorne. He knew that this was not, and could not be, a fair and impartial investigation. To attempt to make it such would be simply to hand Dalton over to his murderers. It was merely an effort, on the part of Dalton's friends, to save, and on the part of his enemies, to sacrifice him. The legal aspect of the case, like the legal aspect of many a similar one in more civilized communities, was very sinister and vague.

Finally the Doctor took his resolution, and acted upon it boldly, or as Stanhope would have said, "in his character of lawyer." He crossed the room and approached Miss Wray, wishing her good morning, and adding some appropriate commonplace in an audible voice, to which Miss Wray responded in her usual low, soft tones. Then he turned to Mountain Mag:

"Good morning, Miss Margaret; are you getting tired of this business?"

"Yes," pronounced she; "I am."

The Doctor moved on a pace or two, and seemed for the

first time to see Aileen Lorne, who sat, as usual, a little aloof from the rest.

"Ah, good morning, Miss Lorne." Then bending toward her, and lowering his voice: "I am expected to question you concerning your relations with Dalton; they are trying to make jealousy his motive. I—I hope you have no damaging evidence to give." These last words in a still lower tone, and emphasized by a quick and meaning glance.

She started and caught her breath. Then: "*Must* I be questioned?" she asked.

"I'm sorry; but it can't be avoided."

"Very well," she said, in a low, firm tone; "I shall be ready."

He shot another glance at the veiled face, and went back to his place; and in a moment the business of the day was resumed.

The Doctor, or now the Coroner, began uniquely, with a neat little speech, in which he ran over briefly the evidence presented on the day before, pronounced an anathema upon all murderers, and ended by a fine little eulogium to those three sisters, Law, Order, and Justice. He said that he desired to prosecute the investigation without fear or favor, and to fasten the guilt where it belonged, let the stigma fall where it would. It was a masterly effort, and the hearts of his listeners went out to him.

"That's the kind o' talk," whispered one burly fellow to another. "He's jest lettin' that fellow Dalton know what he may expect, in mighty plain terms."

"Yes, *sir*," replied his comrade; "*he* don't care no more for Dalton than he would for a common miner."

"John Monckton," called the Coroner.

Monckton, dark and gloomy, rose and came forward. He was an unprepossessing fellow, with a dogged manner and slouching gait.

"Monckton, where were you on the night of the murder?"

From the start which the man gave, it was evident that he was prepared to answer a different sort of first question. But he recovered himself quickly, and said:

"At Daly's, all night."

"At what hour did you go to Daly's?"

"Early; at ten o'clock or thereabouts."

"At what hour did you leave Daly's?"

"I don't know, just—it must have been after four."

"How came you to leave at that time?"

The witness hesitated, and involuntarily turned his eyes toward Mountain Mag. The Coroner repeated his question.

"I was called out," said Monckton sullenly.

"By whom?"

Again Monckton hesitated, but finally answered: "By a man."

"Of what name?"

"I—I don't know."

"Don't know the name of the man who called you out?"

"I don't remember. He wanted to see me about a horse—"

"Stop," said the Coroner sharply. Then raising his voice he called, "Connolley!"

"Here," answered the Regulator.

"Go over to Daly's, and bring his doorkeeper here. I want to refresh Mr. Monckton's memory." Then resuming his questioning: "What did this man say to you about a horse?"

Monckton was silent, but just here there was a little stir and turning of heads. Mountain Mag was upon her feet.

"Doctor," she said, as the Coroner turned toward her a glance of well simulated surprise, "I wish you would put me in Monckton's place."

"Presently, Margaret, presently."

Mountain Mag turned her eyes upon her ranchman. "Monck," she said sharply, "answer Doctor Mitchell truly."

The Doctor was silent a moment, and then he said:

"I think you had better try to remember the name of the man who called you out of Daly's, Monckton."

"It was—Daly's doorkeeper, then," said Monckton sullenly

"And he said—what?"

"He said that a lady wanted to see me."

"Who was the lady?"

"Mountain Mag."

"Now, will you relate, as nearly as possible, just what was said by Margaret Drood and yourself?"

Again Monckton hesitated and looked toward Mountain Mag, who nodded her head and frowned.

"I can't remember just what we said," he began, "but Mag asked if I had seen Cool Hank Dutton; and I said no. And she asked me to go look for him, and I went. I didn't find him."

"And did you report your failure to Mag?"

"Yes; Mag was riding her horse, and she told me to meet her at the foot of the stairs and report, and so I did."

"Was this all the conversation that passed between you?"

"Pretty much. Mag did say, though, that Selwyn had been shot."

"Did she send you away with her horse?"

"Yes; she told me to stable Nick, and see that he had good care."

"When did you see Margaret Drood again after leaving with the horse?"

"I saw her before the beginning of the inquest. She was coming here, and we met at a corner by accident."

"What did she say to you then?"

Monckton lifted his head and an angry flush mantled his cheek.

"She told me then to take her horse and ride to the ranch, and if Cool Hank was there, to tell him the news."

"Did you do this?"

"No; I stayed in town."

"And got drunk?"

"Yes."

"Did you have any object in going to an out-of-the-way place like Rooney's, other than that of getting drunk?"

"N—no."

"Wait; did not Mag say something to you, give you some hint, that you took, and purposely kept out of the way—away from this inquest?"

"Well, as Mag says 'go on,' I may say that she did tell me she'd rather I wouldn't come here."

"Are you on friendly terms with Cool Hank Dutton?"

"We ain't never quarreled."

"When did you see him last?"

"I saw him day before yesterday. We rode out to the ranch together."

"Did he then, or at any other time, talk to you of Selwyn?"

"He spoke of him that day."

"What did he say?"

"Well, he had just been talking with Selwyn, I guess, and was a little sore about something."

"What did he *say?*"

"Well, he cursed him up hill and down; and swore he'd get even before twenty-four hours. I asked what was the row between him and Selwyn; and then he told me to mind my business."

"Did you repeat what he said to Miss Drood?"

"No; there wasn't any need. He had a long talk with Mag, and I dare say he let out some of his mad."

"How long did Cool Hank remain at the ranch?"

"He went away after dark."

"That's all, Monckton."

When Monckton had resumed his seat near the outer room, the Coroner said:

"Now, Miss Drood."

Mountain Mag arose and came forward very quietly.

"Margaret," said the Coroner gently, "why, in giving your evidence, did you omit to mention that it was Cool Hank, and not Monckton, you were in search of night before last?"

Mag drew herself up, and looked fixedly at her questioner.

"Doctor Mitchell," she said firmly, "all that Monckton has just said is true. I admit that, to do him justice. But I will not answer your question, or any question that concerns Hank Dutton—not one."

And Mountain Mag turned on her heel and went back to her place.

CHAPTER XXV.

"A CLOUD OF WITNESSES."

As Mountain Mag resumed her seat, audience and jury looked their amazement. But the Coroner seemed in no wise disturbed; instead, he turned to the jury with a smile upon his face.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I ask you to give special attention to the fact that Miss Drood declines to talk. In some countries, where there is more civilization and less courtesy, a witness who refused to testify would be imprisoned, fined, severely reprimanded for such a course. Instead, as we cannot get the information we seek from Miss Drood, we will look for it elsewhere. Father Miles is a truthful man, and an obliging man; let us question him. Father Miles, will you come forward?"

Thus exhorted, the pale, dark-eyed man in the priestly garments arose and came slowly toward the Coroner.

"Will you sit, Father Miles?"

"Thank you, no, Doctor Mitchell. I will stand, as the others do."

Father Miles, like Doctor Mitchell was one of the institutions of Caledonia. How he, a priest, came to take up his residence there, and alone, or why he came, Caledonia did not know. But there he was, and had been since the town numbered only half a dozen houses, living in a sod house, or "dug-out," so far from the town proper that it would have

been an unsafe residence for almost any one else. But Father Miles feared no man; had nothing to lose, and was hospitable to the humblest wayfarer. He was the gentlest of nurses, and often ministered to the sick and unfriended. He and Doctor Mitchell frequently met beside the cot of some sick or injured man, and the two strangely reticent and isolated men had conceived for each other very kindly feelings, and a profound respect. Unlike the good Doctor, who went wherever fancy led him, Father Miles shunned all public places, and held himself aloof, except when his good offices were required to visit the sick, comfort the afflicted, or bury the dead. To see Father Miles at Mack's, therefore, and in the character of a witness, was a surprise to many.

"Father Miles," began the Coroner, with marked courtesy, "it has come to my knowledge—it is not necessary to explain how—that you know something about a quarrel which occurred between Mr. Selwyn and Cool Hank Dutton, two days or thereabouts before Selwyn met his death."

Father Miles bowed a grave assent.

"Will you tell us about it, in your own way?"

The priest bowed again, and began.

"It was four days ago," he said, "and as early as seven o'clock in the morning. I had walked away from my hut, and was in search of medical herbs that grow in moist and shady places. I had reached the timber to the westward, and was kneeling among the underbrush just at its edge, trying to loosen the earth about some roots, when I heard a splashing in the little stream that flows through the timber to the southeast. Thinking it some roving animal, I stopped my work to listen. At that moment I heard voices, and a name pronounced. It was the name of Marmaduke Selwyn, and as I

did not wish to meet this man, I remained where I was, perfectly concealed by the underbrush about me."

"One moment, Father Miles," broke in the Coroner. "Lest we should be in any wise misunderstood, will you not tell just why you did not wish to meet Marmaduke Selwyn?"

"There was no enmity between us," said the priest slowly, "but I know that he held in light esteem things that I deem sacred. On one or two occasions when we have met, he has interrogated me in his keen, worldly-wise fashion, and neither of us have derived any benefit from the discussions that arose. He seemed to regard me, or my position and profession, as something anomalous. I was, to him, just as interesting as would have been an odd thing in literature, or a grotesque in art. I recognized this, and sought to avoid him."

"You say that you heard his name spoken by some one—did you recognize the speaker, or the voice?"

"I could not, at first, see the speaker, and the voice was so changed and made harsh by some strong emotion, that I did not know it, although I have heard it often."

"And who was this person?"

"They came close to me and stopped their horses, as if about to separate there and go their different ways, which, at last, they did. Then I saw them plainly. They were Marmaduke Selwyn and the young man you call Cool Hank Dutton."

"Will you relate what you heard?"

"It was not much, for when I found that they were really in anger, I tried not to listen. Cool Hank was remonstrating against some course, which he stigmatized as 'low,' 'beneath the baseness of a common pirate,' 'meaner business than he had bargained for,' and similar phrases. He seemed to be urging some point, and insisted more than once that it should

be done quickly; 'to-night,' he said. And when Selwyn declared it to be impossible, he exclaimed: 'Then it shall be done to-morrow night; not an hour later!' All of his words were demanding, or threatening, and all Selwyn's seemed intended to mollify him, instead of which, he appeared to grow more and more enraged. Selwyn's horse was restless, and it carried him some few paces beyond, and I did not hear something that he said; to which the other answered fiercely and in a loud tone: 'I'll never touch a dollar of it, and'—here he uttered an oath—'neither shall you!' Then I heard Selwyn say: 'It's useless to keep up this argument, Hank; wait till to-morrow night, and then, perhaps—' Here Hank broke in: 'No perhaps for me! If you fail me, or try any dodging to-morrow night, it'll be the worse for you; and you and I'll settle it between us.' Then he wheeled his horse and rode away to the southward, while Selwyn came toward town."

"And no word was dropped which could help you to understand the meaning or cause of this quarrel?" asked the Coroner.

"I could understand no more than I have told, sir."

"But you heard enough to assure you that there was trouble between the two? that Cool Hank was bitterly angry?"

"Surely. There could be no doubt on that point."

"You have said that you knew Selwyn. Did you know Cool Hank also?"

"Very well."

"And you did not like him?"

"On the contrary, I was strongly attracted toward him. I could not approve of all that he did, but there were admirable qualities in the man. If I had entertained the slightest feeling of antagonism against Cool Hank Dutton, I should hardly have dared stand here and say what I have said. Right should

prevail, and the innocent must not suffer for the guilty; but I have to-day testified reluctantly, and only from a severe sense of duty."

Father Miles sat down in the midst of absolute silence. The most reckless man there never once thought of doubting or disputing his evidence. But the enemies of Dalton, and those who had condemned him beforehand, were possessed by a growing uncertainty, while Hope whispered in the hearts of his friends.

But if Doctor Mitchell felt triumphant, it was not manifest in his face, which grew more austere as he proceeded.

"We will now," he said, "examine all those who can tell us anything concerning the whereabouts of Cool Hank, from the time when he separated from Selwyn at the edge of the timber, as described by Father Miles, to the time when he was last seen."

He then called a number of witnesses, some of whom knew little, and some nothing, concerning the movements of Cool Hank—after which he again addressed the jury.

"Just here I ask you to note, gentlemen of the jury, that all our efforts to trace the whereabouts of Cool Hank Dutton, from the time when he rode away from Margaret Drood's ranch, have failed. No one can be found who has seen him since the night on which Duke Selwyn was shot. Father Miles saw him in conversation with Selwyn the day before the murder. A witness has just told us that he saw him, again in conversation with Selwyn, at a street corner, on the morning of the next day—the day of the murder. Later, on that same day, Hank rode out of town with John Monckton. After that, *on the eve of the murder*, we lose all trace of him. Gentlemen, I ask you to remember these things."

He turned slowly then, and fixing his eyes upon Aileen Lorne, said, in a voice of uncompromising severity:

"Miss Lorne, I must trouble you to answer a few more questions."

Aileen arose slowly and approached the place of inquisition. When she was opposite the Coroner, she put up a hand, as small and as daintily gloved as was the hand of Miss Wray, and removed the thick veil that had concealed her face. She did not glance at the audience, or her companion witnesses, but fixed her fine eyes full upon the face of the Coroner, and kept them there with a look of haughty inquiry.

"Will you sit, Miss Lorne?"

Aileen threw back her head and answered, as the priest had done:

"Thank you; no."

"Miss Lorne, it becomes my painful duty to put to you some questions of a personal nature. It is an unpleasant necessity, but unavoidable. I trust that you will answer these, as I ask them, in the name of justice and as a duty."

The Coroner looked severe. Miss Lorne simply bowed.

"To begin then, you are acquainted with Philip Dalton?"

"Certainly," replied the lady coldly.

"You know him well?"

"I know him as well as I know any other gentleman whom I have met, more or less, for a period of two or three months." For a moment her eyes turned and rested upon the face of Philip Dalton, with a light that was almost defiant in them, as if she said through them: "You hear me—say otherwise if you dare!"

"What I wish to understand is, did you look upon him as a friend?"

"No."

As she made this answer, Vernet saw Dalton start and a look of pain steal into his eyes.

"Did you then *feel* toward him as a friend?"

Again, prompt and clear, came the single word: "No."

The Coroner seemed to hesitate, and then resumed the attack.

"You were much sought, much admired, it is said, by both Mr. Selwyn and Mr. Dalton. Now which stood foremost in your regard?"

Aileen drew herself up, and a pink flush dyed her pale face.

"Doctor Mitchell," she said, "are these questions *necessary?*"

"Yes; otherwise I should not ask them."

"Then I will answer that if asked to say which of the two I believed best worthy of my friendship, or the friendship of any one, and whose friendship I would prefer, I would choose —Philip Dalton."

The watchful Vernet saw Dalton's eyes light up, and a flush rise to his cheek.

"Then there is no foundation for the story that there was jealousy between these two? that their quarrel concerned you?"

"By 'these two' do you mean Mr. Dalton and Mr. Selwyn?"

"Yes."

"I know nothing of their quarrel, or its cause. That I could have been in any way concerned in it, is absurd. There could have been no reason for it."

"You say that your preference is for Mr. Dalton, and yet it was Selwyn who was your escort that night, after the quarrel?"

A faint smile broke over Aileen's face.

"Preference is not the word, sir. I see that I must speak

plainer, and, since it is in defense of the gentleman whom gossip has attempted to injure through me, I *will*. I liked Mr. Dalton; I *did not* like Mr. Selwyn. For the rest, Mr. Selwyn was my escort, because *he* proffered his services—Mr. Dalton did *not*."

"Miss Lorne, I dislike to further urge this point, but there are those who insist. Do you positively assert that there was no reason known to you why these two men should quarrel?"

"I do." Her words were delivered with an emphasis that seemed to carry conviction, for, with a change of voice that was almost ludicrous in its sudden drop from unsparing inquiry to professional routine, the Coroner said:

"That is all, Miss Lorne."

The two pistols, one still mud-encrusted and empty, the other loaded as when found beneath Dalton's pillow, were now produced; and the finding of the first in the cellar, not far from the place where the body had lain, was substantiated by "a cloud of witnesses." They had all seen the pistol before—at the cellar. It was Connolley himself who picked it out of the mud. Then the second pistol was identified by the two Regulators who had been sent to search Dalton's room. They told the same story. They had been sent shortly after the opening of the inquest, and while Dalton was in attendance there, to search his room. It was Connolley who had sent them, but they both recollected that he had said it was Mack who had suggested the exploit. They had found the pistol under one of the pillows.

Had the bed been occupied? Yes; it had evidently been slept in; it was still in disorder. No; they had taken nothing else from the room, and noticed nothing else that looked in any way suspicious. How had they found the way to

Dalton's room? They had met one of the chambermaids in the hall, and she had directed them. The door was not locked.

The two Regulators were dismissed with scant ceremony, and Billy Piper was called.

"Piper," said the Coroner, "I believe it was you who was sent after Mr. Dalton yesterday?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what hour?"

"Oh, I can't say exactly; somewhere in the neighborhood of four o'clock."

"Did you go in person to Dalton's room?"

"I went up with Potter, the night clerk."

"Did you ask Potter to show you the way?"

"No; I asked for Dalton's number. Potter thought a moment, and then said; 'Oh, yes; Dalton's been changed. I'll show you up.' Then he took a lamp and went ahead to the room. We knocked and got no answer. Then we called, and then tried the door. Finally, Potter muttered something about its being queer, and got a duplicate key, and it unlocked the door. We went in. The room was dark, but Potter's lamp showed us that there was no one there."

"Did you look about the room? was it in good order?"

"Yes; it seemed quite orderly."

"Had the bed been occupied?"

"I should think not. It was all ship-shape and hadn't a wrinkle in it."

"Now, Billy, did you observe Potter half as closely as you did the room? Was *he* 'ship-shape' too?"

"If you mean, was he sober? I must say that he wasn't."

"That will do, Piper. Is Potter here?"

Potter, who was in the outer room, made his way to the front.

"Potter, what time was it when Billy Piper came after Dalton?"

"Couldn't say, sir," replied Potter briskly. "'Twas pretty early in the morning and I had been napping a little."

"Oh, you had been napping. Is it true that you had been drinking, too?"

"Sitting up all night in a hotel bar isn't very frisky business, and I *had* tried to brace up a little."

"Do you ever get things mixed when you 'brace up' in that fashion, Potter?"

"Well a man is liable to. I s'pose I may, now and then."

"You are excused, Potter. Mr. Dalton, may I trouble you again?"

Philip Dalton bowed and came forward.

"Mr. Dalton, how long have you been at the St. Charles?"

"As long as I have been in Caledonia."

"Have you always occupied the same room?"

"No."

"When did you change, and why?"

"I was given a very good room in the main building, and kept it until the afternoon of the day before yesterday. Then Charlie, the day clerk, came to me and said that two ladies had arrived from the East, and that he wanted to give them a good room. He thought their stay would be short, and he asked me to surrender my room to them, and take one of the new rooms, just finished and furnished, above the office. I thought that a room directly over the office, which is none too quiet, day nor night, would hardly be pleasant for ladies; and I made the change."

"Oh; what was the number of your last room?"

"As I have said, it was a new room, and it had not been numbered. It is the second room on that hall, or the one furthest north, and its windows face the street."

"Do you usually lock your door upon leaving your room?"

"No; there are always duplicate keys. I usually leave my door unlocked, and lock my luggage."

"That is all, Mr. Dalton. Is Charlie Carson here?"

As Doctor Mitchell had especially arranged that he should be there, of course Carson promptly presented himself.

"Carson, did you arrange for the exchange of rooms that Mr. Dalton has told us of?"

"I did," Carson answered.

"And all was done precisely as he has said?"

"Yes."

"How many new rooms are there above the office?"

"Two."

"Was either of these rooms occupied on the day when Mr. Dalton made that exchange?"

"No; but the other room was taken almost immediately."

"By whom?"

"By the person who came in the same stage that brought Miss Wray. He did not seem in a hurry, and I had moved Dalton's things, and given the ladies his former room, before the stranger asked to be shown up stairs. Then I gave him the other of the two new rooms."

"*Which* of the two rooms did you give him?"

"I gave him the first; the one next the stairs."

"And Dalton's room?"

"Was the other, of course."

"Then you distinctly state that you put the stranger into the *first* room, and Mr. Dalton into the *second?*"

"That is just what I did."

"That will do, Charlie; just let Billy Piper step into your place."

Piper was back in a twinkling.

"Piper, which room did you go to when you and Potter went to look for Dalton?"

"Why, we went to the *first.*"

"Are you sure?"

"Certain; first door, first room. It's my opinion we went to the wrong room."

"We don't want your *opinion.* Potter, stand up out there —no, you needn't come forward; you look sheepish enough where you are. What have you to say to all this?"

Potter did look truly sheepish.

"Why," he began, "if Charlie says Dalton was in the second room, I guess—"

"I don't want you to *guess;* you do too much guessing. Did you show Billy Piper here, to the first room or the second?"

"Why, the first. You see I—"

"Sit down!" roared the Coroner; and Potter collapsed into his seat, amid the laughter of the audience.

There was a moment of silence, and then the Coroner drew his tall form to its fullest height, and swept the assemblage with a searching glance.

"If any one *especially interested* in this case has a suggestion to make, or a new witness to produce, we will hear from him now." He paused, and again his eye swept the faces before him, resting at last upon Connolley and Mack, who had been exchanging furtive whispers.

As he ceased speaking, Mack again whispered a word to Connolley, and the Coroner was not the only observer who readily conjectured that he was urging the Regulator to reply in some manner to his words.

Connolley stirred uneasily, and turned his eyes from Mack. As he did so, he encountered another pair of eyes, just opposite him, where he could see them, and had seen them, every time he had looked straight before him during the morning's examination. It was not a piercing gaze; Connolley could not resent it, it seemed so unconscious; and yet it was having its effect. It was a clear, persistent, speculative look, too impersonal to be called a scrutiny. Connolley had begun to feel as if the eyes, not the owner of them, were reading his inmost thoughts. A moment before, he had considered Mack's suggestions good, and had resolved, in spite of the Coroner's warning to act upon it. But now, as he encountered again that dark, clear, intensely calm gaze, he shook himself, as if to throw off Mack and his suggestion, and, seized with an unaccountable unwillingness to speak, turned away from his tempter.

As he thus turned, Stanhope, or Podunk, who had been looking as stupid as possible and yet was noting every movement going on about him, said within himself:

"Oh, ho! Van Vernet's been trying his mesmeric powers upon Connolley!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

DOCTOR MITCHELL CREATES A TIE.

Whatever the Caledonians may have thought of Doctor Mitchell—and many looked upon him as brimming over with talents of a sedate and dignified sort; exceedingly learned and wise—they did not suspect him of being an orator; had looked upon him, in fact, as a man who counted his words, and paid them out as precious coin. But on this one occasion he surprised them with a revelation of himself in the character of criminal lawyer. And his peroration was long remembered and often referred to by Caledonians, as the perfect specimen of soaring oratory and convincing argument.

He began by briefly exhorting the jury to attend and to consider his words. He hoped that they had listened with perfect impartiality to the evidence; that they had considered it gravely, and would decide upon it understandingly, and with an eye single to justice. He ran over all the circumstances of the murder, by way of brightening their memories, and briefly reviewed the evidence, referring to his note-book from time to time, and speaking with perfect fairness and very apparent impartiality. Indeed, so nice a balance did he keep that not the acutest lawyer, knowing nothing of his "true inwardness," could have guessed whether he was friend or foe to Philip Dalton. As he proceeded with his *resume*, Mack settled down into quiet, and saw nothing at which to cavil; those who had already made up their minds that Dalton was guilty, felt con-

firmed in that opinion; while the very few who held themselves neutral, saw no reason, for the time, why they should not be neutral still.

"Gentlemen," said the Coroner, when he had arrived at the summing up of the case, "murder is never committed without a motive. Now, here is our case: Three days ago, Marmaduke Selwyn was alive among us. Suddenly, at almost daydawn, we find him dead—treacherously shot by an unknown hand. Who is the murderer? We look about us, and we learn that Philip Dalton has been closeted with him in a box of the Theatre; that high words have passed between them; that they have parted in anger. We begin to investigate, and we prove by three or four witnesses—all more or less under the influence of Mack's wine—that this meeting and this difference really did take place. We question Mr. Dalton, and he does not deny it. But he says: 'Our difference was concerning a personal and private matter, and death has put an end to it; I decline to discuss it.' Then some amateur detective—who is *not*, of course, a friend to Dalton—sends privately, and in Dalton's absence his room is entered and searched. There they find a pistol, and it is the counterpart of the pistol found in the cellar beside the dead man. But that is not the strongest piece of testimony brought against Philip Dalton—mind, I say *testimony*, for testimony may be true or false. I do not say *evidence*, for evidence must always be true. A messenger is sent to Dalton's room, half an hour after the murder is discovered, and when Selwyn is not yet an hour dead. 'Dalton is not in his room,' says the messenger, 'and his bed has not been slept in.'"

At this point, Mack shoots a glance at Connolley and moves in his chair as if uneasy. But the Regulator is giving strict attention to the Coroner's words.

"What a damning piece of testimony! Before the inquiry begins we have heard all, or nearly all this; and we go home saying to ourselves; 'Philip Dalton is *guilty!*' But wait. We begin to investigate, and what do we find? There is another man among us who has quarreled with Duke Selwyn. It is our business to make inquiries, and so we inquire into this. We find that this other has been more or less a companion to Selwyn ever since the two appeared in Caledonia, which, indeed, was about the same time. This second person, with whom Selwyn has lately quarreled, or who has lately quarreled with Selwyn, is *Cool Hank Dutton.* Now, what are the facts in *this* case?

"Father Miles, a witness whose word cannot be doubted, hears Cool Hank accusing and threatening Selwyn; hears him declare that something which Selwyn is reluctant to do, *shall* be done; and that if it is *not done 'before to-morrow night,'* there must be a settlement between them. The 'to-morrow night,' mind you, is the *night of the murder*—and a settlement *is* made. But this is not all. Cool Hank does not change his mood; he lets the sun go down upon his wrath. The next morning, he meets Selwyn and talks with him upon the street. What they say we do not know, but we may be sure that the breach is not healed, for Hank mounts his horse, and riding out of town with John Monckton, curses Selwyn anew. He next sees and talks with Margaret Drood; and when we ask that young woman to tell us what Hank Dutton said about Selwyn, she faces us and refuses to speak. Why? Because she is Cool Hank Dutton's friend, and she will not betray him. I do not blame her for this; neither must you. Her course may not be legal, but it is *loyal*—it is splendid! But even her silence tells us something. It tells us that she has

naught to say that will make Hank Dutton appear less worthy of suspicion.

"But of all these things, not Hank's angry words and threats, heard by Father Miles; his later wrathful words, addressed to Monckton, and uttered on the very day of the murder; not even Mountain Mag's loyal reticence—is the thing that is strangest against Cool Hank Dutton. *The fact that since the eve of this murder he has not been seen, outweighs all the rest.* If Hank Dutton's threats were idle, if his wrath cooled, why is he not here to-day, to ask who killed the man that was once his friend?

"Now, I want to speak of these three men—the one dead, the others living. The first, lies there mute, struck down by the hand of treachery. The second, here in his place, faces us like a man, ready to answer his accusers; ready with hand and brain and money to help on justice and redress this wrong. The third—where is he?

"Who was Duke Selwyn? He came among you more than a year ago, and he made friends from the first. We all liked Duke Selwyn, but who *knew* him? Who ever heard him talk of himself, his home, his friends, his private interests? Oh, he knew *us* perfectly, but did we know *him?* He had no enemies among us, you say. But how do we know what enemies he may have had who were not of us? How can we tell what lies back of the little that we knew in the life of a man like Selwyn—a man of the world, a traveler, an adventurer?

"Next we have Philip Dalton. He has been among us a very short time, but there is no mystery surrounding him. He is the only son and heir of Leroy Dalton, a wealthy New Yorker. He has not told us this, although he carries his

credentials with him, and they are not to be doubted. Duke Selwyn himself told it first, and the fact soon became widely known. Mr. Dalton came here for pleasure, or for change—came as many another young man comes, to see the new country, and to go back better satisfied with the old.

"And now we come to Cool Hank Dutton. We know him, perhaps, as well as we know each other; as well as we knew Selwyn. There are men whom we like without being able to tell why. I think Dutton is one of these. *I* like him. Father Miles tells that he felt strangely attracted toward him, although their lives and ways are so different. We know that Dutton is a fearless fellow, with a hot temper; that he had no petty meannesses, and could not tolerate them in others. He was a man of his word, and woe be to any one who lied to him. If I were the under man in a fight, and Cool Hank came to my rescue, I should feel sure of coming out on top. If Hank met me at seven o'clock and promised to shoot me at eight, I should call upon the undertaker."

There was a little stir among his auditors, and some glances of approval were exchanged. This was the sort of talk that was most pleasing to the average Caledonian, and Doctor Mitchell knew it well.

"I have said that every murder has its motive," the Doctor resumed, "and such a murder as this could have but one of two: robbery or revenge. If Philip Dalton shot Duke Selwyn in the heat of anger, he is the last man in the world likely to stop and deliberately rifle the body of his victim. What use could Dalton, with more money than he knows how to spend, have for Duke Selwyn's watch, and rings, and diamond studs. And yet these things were *taken* by the murderer.

"On the other hand, if Cool Hank, in the excess of his pas-

sion, rode back to town and quietly waited for an opportunity to 'settle' with Selwyn—did *he* rob the body? Who can imagine Cool Hank Dutton a thief? Such a man might shoot his enemy, in a fit of rage, but rob him? Never! I don't believe it; you don't believe it; nobody believes it. And yet, Duke Selwyn was first murdered and then robbed.

"If Philip Dalton had taken a pistol—one of a pair—from his room, and had shot his enemy with it, would he have flung that weapon down beside the body of his victim, knowing that its fellow was left to condemn him? You may answer, 'But this thing is often done; the murderer is seized with a panic and flees, leaving damaging proof behind.' But I say this could not be; the murderer, here, stayed to rob the body. Before doing this, he must have thrown down the pistol. Now, if Philip Dalton had done this, he was too cool to have been so indiscreet. But if some person, who knew that Dalton and Selwyn had quarreled, and who had possessed himself in some way of Dalton's pistol—if such a person should murder and rob Selwyn, he could very easily cover up his tracks, and turn suspicion upon Philip Dalton, by leaving that pistol behind—*just as it was left.*

"Now, gentleman, here you have two cases of circumstantial evidence correspondingly strong. Dalton and Cool Hank are equally under suspicion. Both had quarreled with Selwyn; both threatened him. Dalton's pistol, or a pistol believed to be his, is found near the murdered man. And Cool Hank, since the night of the murder has disappeared. Yet, in the light of such evidence as we have, to fasten this crime upon either of these men is to assume a fearful responsibility, and would be just as likely to sacrifice the innocent as to punish the guilty. If you are not *sure* that you have the right man,

it becomes your duty to bring in a verdict accordingly, and to recommend that every possible effort be made to fasten the guilt where it belongs.

"Gentlemen of the jury, you have the case. Connolley, you will take them in charge, and until their verdict is found, see that no one—*no one*, mind—has access to them."

In the midst of the stir and bustle that followed the Coroner's last words, Connolley marshaled the jurors out through the saloon door nearest the gaming room, and shut them within the empty Theatre. A moment later Mack moved quietly to the door where Connolley stood on guard. But before he could address the Regulator, a lithe form stepped before him, and a pair of keen dark eyes looked straight into his.

"You can't go in there, sir."

"Who the mischief are you?" demanded Mack, fairly livid with rage.

"I'm a friend to fair play, and I've convinced myself that there won't be fair play if *you* get among these jurymen," replied Van Vernet.

As Mack opened his lips for a rejoinder, he saw that Doctor Mitchell was approaching. He checked his speech and waited.

"Doctor," Mack said insinuatingly, as that gentlemen halted and looked his inquiry, "I want to go in and see that those men are made comfortable. Your 'no one' didn't mean me, of course?"

"It did mean you, Mr. Jerry McAffery," replied Doctor Mitchell grimly. "It meant you *especially*. This is not your Theatre now, sir; it's a hall of Justice."

The Jury remained in council half an hour and returned with their verdict. They found: "That Marmaduke Selwyn came to his death by a pistol-shot, at the hands of a person or

"Who the mischief are you?" demanded Mack.—Page 248.

persons unknown." And recommended that prompt measures be taken to discover and punish the criminal.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DALTON DECLARES HIS INTENTIONS.

Late in the afternoon, Doctor Mitchell and Van Vernet sat in the office of the former, discussing the situation and waiting for Podunk and Philip Dalton.

The Doctor sat near his single front window, which commanded a view of the most public approach, keeping an eye townward. He sat leaning forward, his elbows upon his knees, whittling leisurely at a long pine stick. Vernet occupied the Doctor's big home-made arm chair, and was smoking a good cigar—one of an assorted collection which he had been wise enough to bring with him from the East. There had been a long silence between them, which finally the Doctor broke by saying:

"I am not sure whether it was the best thing for us or not, your coming out so strong down there."

"You mean my interference when Mack attempted to get among the jurors?" asked Vernet, taking his cigar from between his lips.

"Yes."

"Well, I don't know. On the whole I think it's quite as well. Mack has a wholesome reverence for any new comer who shows a fair purse and an inclination to open it now and then. Besides, it was time to let him understand that Dalton

has a friend or two here. If it were not for the Stage Company and their interests, I would have introduced myself to him in *propria persona* A fellow like Mack has a horror of a detective who has any sort of governmental backing."

"What I was thinking of was *your* interest. Of course what you did was best for Dalton. But now that you have set yourself in opposition to Mack and his friends, your own person may not be respected. As for introducing yourself as Vernet, it would be pure madness."

Vernet laughed softly; then he said, peering out into the dusky street, from which the light had almost faded:

"Some one is coming here and—it's—it's—Podunk."

He hastened to open the door, and in a moment Podunk was within. He entered with scant ceremony, and cast a swift glance about the room.

"Isn't Dalton expected here?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes," answered both at once.

"Sit down, Podunk," said the Doctor.

"Did you expect or intend to make my identity known to him!" persisted Podunk, without heeding the Doctor's invitations.

"Why, yes," answered Vernet: "unless you have an objection."

"Well, I have," said Podunk. "And although I very much want to talk with Dalton, and to hear him talk about this business, I am sure that it will be best not to inform him that Podunk and Dick Stanhope are one and the same. Does he know that you have a partner here, Van?"

"I think I hinted to him that I expected a co-laborer."

"But you did not name me?"

"Certainly not."

"Then don't. You recollect that Dalton and I were not acquaintances. I wonder if he has ever seen me?"

"I don't think he has; at least I never heard of it if he did. Of course he knows you by reputation and name."

"He is welcome to, so long as he don't know my phiz." Then turning abruptly upon Doctor Mitchell: "Doctor, what do you know of that clerk at the St. Charles—Charlie Carson?"

"Carson? I know him for a good fellow. I think he's to be trusted. He's a steady, reliable sort of chap, and he's gritty too, if they do call him 'tenderfoot.'"

"Then if you wanted a confederate, a confidant in some degree, would you be afraid to trust Charley?"

"No; not if I were you."

"Why I more than another?"

"Because you're just the sort of a fellow that he'd naturally tie to."

"Thanks, Doctor. I may have to give him a trial, for I think some of coming out in society a bit, and can't get on without a little help. You won't do; and Van won't, because we would have to be too much together, and I don't want to be identified with him. Besides, I'm convinced that we've got an organized band to work against, and we may want to get up a little organization of our own yet. Did you set a time for Dalton?"

"No," said the Doctor; "he set it himself—nine o'clock."

Podunk dropped down into the nearest chair. "Why didn't you say so before," he demanded, "and not keep me 'poised for flight' in this fashion? I've got plenty of time to tell you what's been going on at Mack's then."

"What *has* been going on at Mack's?" asked Vernet,

"There's been a kind of an indignation meeting, or what started out to be one. You see, Mack's a bit intimidated, and Connolley a good deal unsettled, by the talk the Doctor here has been treating them to, and they don't feel quite sure of their ground—either of them. I don't believe that Connolley's a corruptible man, and I think Mack's of the same opinion. Mack isn't making or trying to make a confederate of him—only a tool, a screen. Well, the town is all upset, of course, over the outcome of the inquest; and Mack, mounted on a chair, was trying to harangue the crowd in his saloon, when in walks Dalton."

"Dalton!" exclaimed both his hearers.

"Yes, Dalton himself. He pushed his way through the crowd, and went straight to the place where Mack was uplifting his voice. The sight of him, walking in so coolly, seemed to startle Mack; and when Dalton said very determinedly 'Mr. McAffery, step down one moment, if you please,' I'm blessed if Mack didn't come down like a monkey off a pole. Evidently he expected that Dalton was about to say something personal. But when Mack got down, Dalton stepped up, looking as serene as if he was leading off a cotillion. 'Gentlemen,' says he, and every man stood still and held his tongue to listen, 'I have happened to hear that it is the opinion of *one* or more of Caledonia's leading citizens that I intend to leave the place, in order to be out of harm's way. So I take this opportunity to tell you that I shall *not* leave Caledonia while there is a doubt as to the author of Duke Selwyn's death. I intend to remain here in spite of threats and bluster, and I here and now offer a reward of ten thousand dollars to the man or men who will find the murderer, and give reasonable proof of his guilt. I will pay all expenses incurred by parties

making honest efforts to investigate this mystery, and reward all who help in the work. I can be found at the St. Charles, as usual.' Then, presto! down steps Mr. Dalton, and bows to Mack. 'Thank you, Mr. McAffery,' he says, and walks out as serenely as he came."

"Well," said Vernet, after a moment's thoughtful silence, "that settles one point. We hoped to get Dalton to see the propriety of leaving Caledonia until this business has been sifted, but if he's made *that* announcement—"

"He'll stick to his text?" suggested the Doctor.

"Not a doubt of it. What do you think of it, Dick?"

"Think? Why I think he's true grit. He did the only thing he could do decently. *You* talk of running him out of the way! I'd like to see any one run *you* out of the way of danger under similar circumstances!"

Vernet was discreetly silent.

"No," went on Stanhope, "if anything was needed to induce me to stand by Dalton and see him through, it would be this little harangue of his at Mack's. But, gentlemen, we've taken a large contract, besides the task of clearing Dalton; we have got to watch over him, or we'll have him carried off and lynched under our very noses. Now, *how* are we going to protect Dalton, find Selwyn's murderer, discover the fate of Stephen Wray, and run down Vernet's train robbers—eh?"

There was a long moment of silence, during which the three pondered this knotty problem. Then Vernet turned toward Doctor Mitchell:

"In our talk last night," he said, "you dropped a hint that led me to think there might be a connection between one or two of these points."

"Umph!" returned the Doctor. "You are a detective—haven't you evolved a theory yet?"

"A theory? Oh, yes. It's the easiest thing in the world to evolve theories, but one *fact* will upset a whole battalion of them."

"That's so," said Podunk. "Suppose we marshal our facts first, put them on parade, and review the troop."

"Umph!" said the Doctor.

"Doctor," said Stanhope, veering suddenly from the subject, "as soon as it's dark enough to illuminate, let me suggest that you close the curtain, and that we keep our voices down. It wouldn't be strange if we had listeners about."

"Do you think any one saw you come?" questioned the Doctor.

"Oh, I didn't come secretly. I should have waited until after dark if I had intended my visit to be undiscovered. I came direct from Mack's, and Mack himself gave me Godspeed."

"Perhaps," said Vernet smilingly, "you'll tell us how you came to be on such good terms with Mack?"

"To be sure. You see, to begin, I was the only man of that jury who stuck for convicting Dalton. *I* wanted him pronounced guilty."

"Oh, you did!" ejaculated the Doctor.

"Yes. I was not to be moved, either. I confess that I didn't give any very logical reason why I believed Dalton guilty—you know, Doctor, you said that I couldn't reason; well, any man of that jury will back your opinion. But I was a long time giving up my point, and of course, after the thing was settled, it didn't take long to let it come out that Podunk wanted Dalton convicted. Then, to carry out my

programme, I was sulky and full of dark sayings. I took care not to be too obtrusive, but Mack found me out, and took me by the hand. We had quite a long conversation, Mack and I. He asked me, among other things, what I thought of you, Doctor."

"Umph! And what did you tell him?"

"I don't recall the precise language; but it was to the effect that I considered you a cranky old sardine."

"Umph!" grunted the Doctor, while Vernet laughed.

"And then I clinched the business by declaring that I wasn't going to have the Doctor think that I had weakened, but would take the first opportunity to inform him that I hung out for my principles to the last moment. At this point Mack took me to the upper bar and filled my black bottle, and after a little more talk he asked me when I was going to tell Doctor Mitchell how I stood. I said I guessed I'd make a call soon; and he suggested that I come and kind o' find out how you were takin' things, and what you were about, anyhow."

"Wasn't there a little risk in that, Dick?" asked Vernet.

"There's always a risk. But you know my motto: 'The boldest course is the safest.' I saw that I could not get away from Mack and his gang unnoticed; that if I tried it, I would probably be detained, or, worse yet, followed. So I came openly. But we've strayed from the subject—let's go back to our facts."

"Proceed," said Vernet.

"Fact number one then: Somebody has killed Duke Selwyn. Naturally, the first question is, who did it?"

"Of course," said the Doctor impatiently.

"Not *of course*. I don't ask that question first; I ask, what was the motive? was it robbery or revenge?"

"Dick is right," said Vernet. "The motive found, it would not be so difficult to also find the man."

"The—man!" repeated Stanhope; and Vernet was quick to note the queer smile upon his face. "Just so. Now have either of you a theory, a suspicion?"

"Doctor Mitchell," said Vernet, "you first."

"I can't say anything—unless it is Cool Hank that did it. I see that neither of you intend to suspect Dalton."

"I don't," said Vernet promptly.

"I don't—at present," said Stanhope. "Let's move on to our next fact: It's certain that Philip Dalton, if he stays here, is in danger. How are we to protect him?"

"I scarcely think," said Vernet, "that it will be worth while to discuss that until we see him, and find out how much of our good advice he is willing to take."

"Well," said Stanhope, "suppose, for the present, you leave the business of finding the motive and the murderer to me, and you two turn your attention to Dalton's welfare."

"Dick!" said Vernet, leaning forward to look in his friend's face, "you have found something, some clue?"

"No."

"But you have a suspicion?"

"If I have," replied Stanhope gravely, "it is so vague that I must not name it as yet." Then turning toward Doctor Mitchell: "And now we come to fact three: Stephen Wray, with money and valuable papers, came to Caledonia and mysteriously disappeared. Was he murdered, think you?"

"I hope not," said the Doctor, "for his daughter's sake."

"Amen to that," added Vernet.

"Let us suppose," resumed Stanhope, "that he was not murdered, what then?"

"If I hadn't been abducted myself so recently," said the Doctor, "I should say that it wasn't an easy thing to abduct a full grown man, even here in Caledonia."

The two detectives laughed.

"Why, you went along meek enough," said Stanhope. "Honestly, Doctor, were you not just a little bit scared?"

"I was horribly scared at first," said the Doctor gravely, "for I thought I had fallen into the hands of Judge Lynch. I fancied they had decided to cut short the inquest and my career both together. Yes; I *was* scared; but I didn't intend to let them know it."

"Nor did you," declared Stanhope. "Not one of us could have guessed it. But about Mr. Wray: What comes after the fact?"

"Theories," answered Vernet. "We've nothing else to begin with."

"Very good; let's theorize then. And to commence, let us suppose that he is alive somewhere. How shall we find him?"

"Umph!" grunted Doctor Mitchell.

"First," said Vernet, "we must learn if he appeared to any one in Caledonia as Stephen Wray. He didn't register at the St. Charles—there's no such name on the books."

"And yet," said Stanhope, thoughtfully, "ten to one he stopped there. Have you talked much with Miss Wray, Van?"

"Very little on this subject."

"Well, suppose you find out from her as much as possible concerning her father's habits and get a description of him. Perhaps she has some of his letters, and if Selwyn's correspondence with him could be got hold of, it might tell us something.

It would be delicacy to spare Miss Wray's feelings, but it won't be wise. You or the Doctor must see her, and hear all that she can tell."

"That is the right plan," said Doctor Mitchell. Then rising quickly: "How dark it has grown. I will light a lamp." He did so, first lowering the curtains, and then came back to his place. "We were 'supposing' that Miss Wray's father has been abducted," he said: "by whom then?"

"By some band of men who know that he is a New York millionaire," suggested Stanhope.

"There's the rub!" said Vernet. "If we could but find the first man of this gang! Doctor, direct our suspicions."

"If I were you," said the Doctor slowly, "I would begin with our friend Mack."

"If he were not dead," said Stanhope, "*I* would begin with Duke Selwyn."

"It's the same thing," dropped from the Doctor's lips.

"Is it?" queried Stanhope. "Then we have a starting point. We must find if Stephen Wray has been seen here at all; and if so, under what cognomen, for he must have dropped his own name from some motive; caution, probably. If we can ever connect him with Selwyn, or Mack, or both—"

"We will have made a beginning," added Vernet.

"Now, I'll tell you what I want to do," said Stanhope briskly, rising as he spoke. "I want to hang about Mack's until I find out the meaning of his double picket fence and his secret chamber. I want to discover who that wounded man is. Doctor, what style of build was he? Was he tall or short, stout or thin, old or young?"

"Tall," answered the Doctor; "tall and well knit; a muscular fellow, with a smooth, white skin."

"Well, I'm deeply interested in this retreat of Mack's, and I intend to give it considerable of my time and attention. I can't see you often, I'm afraid, but I'll manage a way to communicate with you. I'll find a trusty messenger, and use the old cipher,—Van, you can translate for the Doctor. In case of emergency don't wait to write, but give me a signal of distress. I'll contrive to come within hailing distance pretty often. And now, hadn't I better cut this short? Dalton will soon be here, and—"

"Dick," broke in Vernet, placing a hand upon his friend's arm, "Dick, I think you had ought to stay and hear what Dalton has to say. If you don't want him to see you, it is not absolutely necessary that he should."

"I don't know," said Stanhope shaking his head; "somehow I dislike the idea, where Dalton is concerned—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the Doctor. "This is no time for squeamishness. Dalton's in danger every moment, and he will trust you as readily as he would us."

"Still," said Stanhope hesitating, "I don't half like it—hark!"

They heard the sound of voices, uttering quick, threatening exclamations, and then, while Doctor Mitchell moved toward the door, Vernet seized Stanhope by the shoulders and forced him toward the bedroom.

"In with you," he whispered; "whoever it is, he must not see *you*."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SPY.

Mrs. McAffery was seated at the head of her long tea table, and nearly all her "boarders" were gathered about it that evening, when Aileen Lorne glided quietly into her place almost unnoticed by the others, who were listening, one and all, to Billy Piper's account of the latest event at Mack's. He was telling of Dalton's sudden appearance in the saloon and of his brief address to the crowd; and he told his story well. He had just begun when Aileen came in, and she had heard it to the end before he observed that she was a listener.

"Is it Mr. Dalton who said that, Billy?" she asked, when he had finished, leaning forward, and looking down the table to where he sat.

"Yes'm," replied Piper, who stood a little in awe of the beautiful, reserved *Prima Donna*, but who yet admired her immensely. "It was Dalton."

Miss Lorne drew back in her place, and quietly took her cup of weak tea from the hand of the landlady.

"I heard," said Kit Duncan, who was the gossip of the Theatre, "that there was the strongest kind of talk of lynching."

"Be careful, Miss Lorne," cried Mrs. McAffery, "you're spilling your tea—there!"

"Really," said Aileen, as she put down her cup, "that was very careless of me."

"Do you suppose," went on Kit Duncan, addressing her remarks to Piper, "that Dalton's heard of this talk? Don't you reckon he's trying a little bluff, Billy?"

"No," said Piper shortly, "I don't. There's no bluff about that man; he's a gentleman, if one ever set his foot in Caledonia. If you'd seen him this afternoon, you wouldn't think he was scared. Not much! He walked in there as cool as if he owned the place; and he walked out again just as cool. I noticed,—" added Billy, reaching across the table and spearing at a small, thin slice of bread with a big steel fork,—"I noticed,—" securing the bread and landing it safely on his plate—"that nobody was in a particular hurry to begin making remarks till he was out of hearing."

"Well," commented La Belle Florine, glancing obliquely across at Aileen Lorne, "*I* never could see anything much in that Dalton. He wasn't half the man Selwyn was,—eh, Aileen?"

"Are you asking my opinion?" said Miss Lorne quietly.

"Yes; give it to us."

"You won't find it worth much, to you. Two men could not be more unlike. The one was everything that the other was not."

"Oh, dear!" said Kit Duncan, "I'd like to know what a body can make out of that!"

A faint smile flitted across Aileen's face; but amid the babble going on about her she remained silent, and seemingly undisturbed. When she arose from the table, she came close to Billy Piper's place, and bending over, said to him:

"Mr. Piper, will you do me a favor, when you are at leisure?"

"Yes'm," answered Billy briskly.

"If you will wait, I will come down in a few moments."

"All right, Miss Lorne."

The "Parlor" of Mack's boarding-house was a small, stuffy, ill-ventilated room, seldom used for two reasons: It was a place of state, closely watched over by Mrs. McAffery, and it was too small to accommodate the entire family. It had long been understood that the parlor was not for general use, and when one of the young ladies wished to receive a call of state, she was wise enough to apply to Mrs. McAffery, who usually carried the key. When the weather was cold, the boarders congregated in the big, barren dining-room; and when it was warmer, they made themselves as comfortable as they could in the long, narrow hall, sitting upon the stairs, or outside upon the doorsteps.

Aileen Lorne, by special grace, had the exclusive use of one very small bedroom; and in this she usually remained, keeping as much as possible aloof from the rest. And so when, shortly after supper, she came down the stairs, passing quietly through the groups of loiterers, they looked their surprise, but Aileen went calmly on, and entered the dining-room, where Mrs. McAffery was gathering up a soiled and faded collection of pink rags which she dignified by the name of napkins. In a moment Aileen came out again, and went straight to where Billy Piper stood exchanging pleasantries with two or three of Mack's fairies.

"Now, Billy," she said, and then turned away, unlocked the parlor door and entered, followed by the obedient Billy, who closed the door behind him and shut out a chorus of comments.

"Billy," said Aileen, in her soft, slow voice, "you are the only one whom I would ask to do me this favor, or whom I would dare trust."

"I'm sure you may trust me, Miss Aileen," said Billy eagerly.

"Yes, I think I may; and I shall feel very grateful to you too. Billy, will you go to the St. Charles for me; now, right away? I think there is time."

"Plenty of time; yes'm. Of course I'll go. You know there's only a rehearsal to-night, Miss Aileen"

"Oh, surely. I want you to give this note, as privately as you can, to Mr. Dalton."

Billy looked a trifle surprised, but only said: "All right."

"You need not stay for an answer. And, Billy, will you promise me something?"

"Yes'm; *anything*," said Billy recklessly.

"You are about town, almost everywhere, are you not? You hear all that's going, don't you?"

"I guess there aint much that I don't hear," he replied truthfully.

"You—they said that there was talk of violence—lynching. Will you try to learn all that is going on? try to keep track of the movements of these men who are threatening violence, and if there is really any danger, will you come to me *at once*, no matter when or where. The moment there is a movement, an attack upon Mr. Dalton, will you come to me—*in time?*"

Billy stared dumbly.

"In time?" he said. "I—I don't understand."

"Never mind that. Only promise to inform me at once if danger threatens."

"I'll do that, Miss Aileen. I promise you. But as for danger, Dalton's in danger every minute that he stays in Caledonia."

A quick sigh escaped her lips, and she looked very pale in the gloomy room.

"Is there anything else, Miss Lorne?"

"No, Billy; and thank you."

"Then I'll go. And if you'll just call on me when you want a friend—I mean anything done, Miss Lorne, I'll be proud—"

"Thank you, Billy,"—she put out her hand quickly—"you are very good. I think you mean what you say. I shall look upon you as my one friend here. And I shall be grateful."

Billy put the note in his pocket, and in another moment the wondering groups in the hall saw him come out, and hasten townwards, while Aileen went back to her room as quietly as she came.

After paying his visit to Mack's, Philip Dalton had returned to the St. Charles, where he remained until supper-time, smoking in the office, and exchanging occasional commonplaces with Charlie, the clerk, and the two Tourists, one of whom had just been released from service on the Coroner's jury. He parried all efforts to converse upon the interesting topic of the murder, and seemed not at all discomposed by the keen glances cast upon him by the constantly changing groups about him. He ate his evening meal in his usual leisurely fashion, and went back to the office to smoke a fresh cigar.

After supper Charlie Carson was relieved by Potter, the night clerk, but he did not leave the office with his usual alacrity. Instead, he lighted a cigar, and perched himself upon one end of a long counter, swinging his legs and looking indifferent to all things mundane. He was sitting thus when Billy Piper entered the office and gradually approached Dalton.

Billy was clever, and he managed to transfer the little white note into Dalton's hands from his own without attracting the attention of those about them. But his action did not escape the eye of Charlie Carson, who, in truth, had been keenly alive to every movement of Philip Dalton's since the close of the inquest.

Dalton cast one quick glance at the delicate handwriting upon the envelope, and Charlie Carson saw a swift flush tint the face that bent over it. Then it was placed in a convenient pocket, and Dalton looked up at the messenger.

"A thousand thanks, Billy," he said, in a low tone. "Any instructions?"

"No," said Billy, and was about to turn away.

"Stop, Billy; is there anything I can do for you?"

"No," said Billy again.

"No? Well, have a cigar. And remember, Billy, when you do want a favor, I'm under obligations to you."

The variety performer nodded, and moved away: and Dalton, the flush still lingering upon his cheeks, soon arose and went to his room. Once there he locked his door, and with eager hand tore open the creamy envelope. As he unfolded the note, and his eyes rested upon the first word, the flush mounted higher, his whole face lighted up; and yet it was a brief note, and very simple.

MY FRIEND:

If you still wish to talk with me, you will find me in the parlor of Mrs. McAffery's boarding-house to-morrow morning, at nine o'clock. Since we met last, I have discovered that I also wish to see you.

AILEEN LORNE.

That was all. But it wrought its change in Philip Dalton. He put the note away carefully, after twice reading it. He sat down by the window, and meditated long, but he did not

relight the cigar, and the new look of animation was still in his face. By and by he arose and paced the floor, and every moment his restlessness increased. He looked at his watch; it was only eight o'clock. He resumed his solitary march, and kept it up for a long half hour. Then again he looked at his watch.

"I'll go," he muttered; "half an hour can't matter. I must make the time pass somehow."

He went to his trunk, and took out a silk traveling cap with a broad visor, which he drew well down over his face. He exchanged the dark, close-fitting coat which he wore, for a shaggy, blouse-like garment, which he buttoned up to his chin; and then surveyed himself in the small mirror hung high upon the wall.

Once more he visited his trunk, and this time something cold and glittering was slipped into each of the two capacious pockets in the sides of the shaggy coat. Then he locked the trunk and sallied forth. In the hall he met Charley Carson, who stared and came to a halt directly before him.

"Will you be so good—" He stopped abruptly and stared again. "Mr. Dalton!" he exclaimed. "I took you for a stranger, and was about to ask what you were doing in this part of the house. I half thought you were trying to spy—"

"Upon myself?" asked Dalton with a smile.

"Well, yes. Are you going out, Mr. Dalton?"

"For a short time." Dalton nodded as if to end this interchange of words, and passed on.

As he walked toward the stairs, Charlie followed him with his eyes, and for a moment seemed ready to ask him to stop. Then he seemed to take a sudden resolution, and went quietly after Dalton.

For some moments Dalton walked slowly, seemingly intent upon his own thoughts. Then his ear caught the sound of feet close behind him and stepping as he stepped. Without changing his gait he looked over his shoulder, and listened intently. Yes; some one was following him, and not far behind. Ten paces more brought him to a street corner. He turned abruptly and waited just out of sight. In a moment the person following was close upon him, and Dalton stepped quickly forward. Hs was face to face with the other, and he could see by a light gleaming out from a window near them, that it was Charlie Carson.

"Charlie!" he exclaimed. "Were you following me?"

"That's what I was doing, Mr. Dalton, and I must be awkward at the business," replied Charlie, with an embarrassed half laugh.

"May I ask why you were doing it?"

"Why!" Charlie put a hand upon his arm, and lowered his voice. "Is it possible that you don't realize that you are not safe on these streets? Man, we don't want another Coroner's inquest—not yet."

Dalton was silent for a moment. Then he said very slowly:

"And did you come out after me to be at hand in case of need?"

"I meant no intrusion, Mr. Dalton. I did not wish to spy upon your movements. But I *couldn't* see you go out alone like this; the risk is too great."

"Charlie," said Dalton coming close to the other, and passing a hand through his arm, "I'm not quite unprotected. I've got a double-barreled pistol in one pocket, and a six-shooter in the other."

"Well," said Charlie, brightening, "I'm pretty well fixed myself; so if you want to go anywhere, come on."

They walked forward slowly for a little way, and then Dalton said:

"Charlie, I appreciate your motives, and I'll prove it to you in some way. I have no intention of doing anything reckless, and I know the risk I run. Now, I can't take you with me—not because I do not trust you, but because it's an appointment. But I'll tell you where I'm going. I'm expected at Doctor Mitchell's at nine o'clock."

"Oh!" ejaculated Charlie, drawing a breath of relief, "then I'll just go with you as far as the cottage, and turn you over to the Doctor; I'll risk you in his hands. You don't object to that, I hope?"

Dalton laughed softly; he was in a peculiarly complacent mood.

"No," he said, "I can't quarrel with an act of disinterested friendship, if it does make me feel a bit ridiculous. So come along."

He tightened his grasp upon Carson's arm, and they walked briskly forward until they were in sight of the Doctor's cottage. Dalton seemed absorbed with his own thoughts. But Charlie's keen glance was constantly roving, and as they approached the cottage, he put a hand up and touched the hand of Dalton where it rested upon his arm.

"Stop!" he whispered; "there's some one outside."

Dalton stopped and peered before him.

"I can't see anything," he whispered back.

"He's not moving now, that's why. I saw a form at the corner of the house. Wait here. It's a spy of some sort; I'll go forward and start him."

"Hold; let me start him. You follow him, and find out who he is, if you can."

"All right," breathed Charlie. "Go on."

Dalton moved softly toward the cottage, with Charlie close in his wake. The figure at the window must have been intent upon his effort to hear what was going on inside, for he never stirred until Dalton's hand came heavily down upon his shoulders.

"What are you spying here for?" demanded Dalton.

With an exclamation of surprise, the fellow turned to run.

But Dalton's grip was strong, and there was a short struggle. In the midst of it, the Doctor's door was heard to open; there was a warning hiss from Charlie, and Dalton recoiled in time to escape a blow from a keen, thin-bladed knife, which the fellow had managed to draw with his left hand. At that moment the ruffian broke away and ran townward.

"Go in quick!" whispered Charlie, and started in hot pursuit.

"What's all this?" It was the Doctor's voice, and he now appeared in the doorway, holding a lamp high above his head.

Dalton recovered himself, and turned toward him.

"Only a little skirmish, Doctor," he said; and in a moment was beside him in the doorway.

"It's Dalton!" cried Vernet from within. "Come in, man, and shut the door."

"What are you spying here for?" demanded Dalton.—Page 270.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE STORY OF THE PISTOL.

"Well," commented Doctor Mitchell, when Dalton had told of the adventure, taking care to give Charlie Carson his due, "and so you've had your first skirmish."

"And Charlie Carson has *enlisted*," added Vernet, with an intonation that Dalton did not understand.

"I'm anxious about Carson," said Dalton. "I think I ought to go out and look after him."

"Nonsense!" ejaculated the Doctor; "he's all right."

"I don't know about that. He won't make himself popular by espousing my cause."

"He won't be the only unpopular man in Caledonia," said the Doctor grimly.

"No; I'm a Jonah. I'm drowning all my friends."

"Bosh!" cried the Doctor impatiently, "your friends can take care of themselves; never mind them."

"Dalton," said Vernet abruptly, "we can't do much without your confidence. And of course you know that the Doctor here did not press for all that you might have told. Are you willing to go over the ground again with us?"

"Perfectly," said Dalton; "and to answer any questions that do not concern others more than myself. First of all, I want to say that I thank the Doctor immensely for not being too curious about that pistol."

"Why?" asked Vernet.

"Because the pistol taken from my room was once the property of Duke Selwyn, and the more I think of it, the more I believe—although I can't see how it can be—that the other weapon was once Selwyn's also."

"Oh!"

"I'll tell you how the one came into my possession. As I have said, Selwyn and I were college mates, and for a time after we left college excellent friends. But our tastes were not alike. Selwyn was inclined towards gayeties that did not attract me. The first time I visited Selwyn at his rooms after we were out of school, I saw upon his table a handsome case, open and displaying a pair of pistols. That which I owned is one of them. Of course I admired them; and Selwyn told by what lucky stroke they fell into his hands. They were, as you must have observed, really unique; and had once been part of a rare collection of weapons. I was setting myself up as a *connoiseur* in such things, and of course talked much of their fine workmanship and finish.

"It was some weeks before I visited Selwyn again. The pistol-case still lay open upon the table, but one of the weapons was missing. I spoke of it, and Selwyn laughed and replied: 'Yes; I have given it to a friend.' 'You should have given him both,' I said; 'you have spoiled the set.' He laughed again, and said: 'We thought it would be fairer to divide.'

"We met occasionally for some four or five weeks. Again he asked me to come to his rooms one evening, to meet two or three friends. I went and found myself early. Selwyn was writing a letter, and I bade him go on, while I would amuse myself. I felt quite at home, of course, and after looking aimlessly about, I noticed the pistol-case closed and pushed aside behind some pieces of *bric-a-brac*. I drew it out and

opened it. As I did so, Selwyn looked up and said: 'Are you superstitious, Phil?' 'Why?' I said; 'not usually.' 'Well,' said Selwyn, 'there's a saying, I believe, that it is unsafe to give a friend a deadly weapon; that it is sure to breed war. And I think there may be something in it.' 'Why?' I asked. 'Because the one upon whom I bestowed the mate of that pistol, has quarreled with me—or worse. Now, I'm anxious to find out if it really was the pistol that did it.' 'Well,' I said, 'suppose you give away this one and see what the result will be?' 'Good,' said he; 'I'll give it to you, Phil; you're the most peaceably inclined fellow that I know.' 'Was the quarrel really so terrific?' I asked. 'Unless I had been shot dead with my own weapon, it couldn't have been worse,' he replied.

"Just then the others came, and I shut the case and put it down. When we broke up, Selwyn remembered our chaff, and made me take the pistol. 'I don't want to keep the thing,' he said, 'and I won't be cheated out of my experiment.' I took the pistol out of the case, and put it into my pocket. 'You may keep the shell,' I said laughingly; 'it will make a more even distribution."

He paused, and for a moment no one spoke, then he resumed:

"I only saw Selwyn once, in the East, after that. I sailed for Europe soon, and in my wanderings I got into the habit of keeping the little pistol about me. It was dainty, and trim, and *true*. When I carried a weapon, it was usually that; and I slept with it near at hand habitually, after waking to find a burglar in my room one night, and seeing him escape, carrying my watch with him, because no weapon was within my reach."

"And you did not see Selwyn again until recently?" asked Vernet,

"No," Dalton answered abruptly. He seemed trying to recall some thought.

"Did he ever say anything that would give you a hint as to the identity of the person owning the other pistol?"

"I have told you absolutely all he said—except—except this: Last Winter, at our first meeting, I spoke of the two pistols, and of his superstition. I showed him mine, and asked him if he had seen the other. He frowned, and then laughed. 'I think I was very near it not long ago,' he said, 'and I expect to encounter it once more—at least.' It almost seems as if Fate had her hand in this affair."

"Yes; it would appear that he did encounter it," said Vernet musingly.

"If this unknown person, to whom Selwyn gave the pistol so long ago, is the one who killed him," said Doctor Mitchell, "he must have been in Caledonia; may be here yet."

"At any rate," said Vernet, "this business of the pistols gives us a new point of view; a fresh start, as it were. And, Dalton, you did well to say nothing of this at the inquest."

"If I had told this story there," said Dalton, "it would have been looked upon as a trumped up tale, to account for the second pistol. It could have done no good."

"None," said Doctor Mitchell; "you were wise not to tell it."

CHAPTER XXX.

AILEEN AND PHILIP.

At nine o'clock on the following morning, Philip Dalton presented himself at Mrs. McAffery's boarding-house.

Aileen had chosen her hour wisely, for Mack's people were seldom astir so early, and the house was quiet, Aileen, Mrs. McAffery, and one over-worked "girl" being the only ones astir. Aileen had treated the parlor to a little air, and arranged the curtains so that they admitted a gentle half-light; and it was she who opened the unpainted door to Dalton, before he had found time to knock.

"I saw you pass the window," she said, by way of explanation. "Come this way, Mr. Dalton."

Her voice was low, and her face very pale, but she seemed quite calm as she ushered him into the little room and closed the door. As she turned from the door they stood very near each other, and face to face.

"Aileen!" he said eagerly; "Aileen!" And he held out his hands to her.

But the girl drew back, and her face became, if that were possible, a shade paler.

"Pardon me," he said quickly; "I forgot—" And then a flush mounted to his forehead. "Aileen—Aileen, is it possible—do you believe me guilty of—"

"Stop! she cried sharply, and putting up her hand as if to ward off a blow. "Stop! You shall not say it. Philip

Dalton, whatever else I may doubt, I believe in your honor always."

"Aileen—" he came a step nearer, and she held her place, looking at him steadfastly— "until to-day I have thought, I believed, that you cared for Duke Selwyn. What did you mean to-day, when you—" he stopped suddenly; the right word would not come.

"When I said before all those people that I would choose you rather than him, for a friend?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I meant what I said; all of it."

"You said that you did not like Selwyn."

"I say it now."

"But you never said it before—you let me think that you cared more for his society than for mine."

She turned with a weary gesture, and seated herself upon a low chair.

"Sit down, please," she said. And when he had obeyed her, she went on in a low even tone: "I will tell you the truth now; I did not tell it before. I allowed you to think that I preferred the society of Duke Selwyn because I wanted you to give me up—to go back to your home. I had asked you to go, and you would not."

"I could not," he corrected with a sad smile.

"It is the same thing. When I found that you had followed me here, I said to myself: 'I have been to blame after all. I have done something, said something, looked something, that he has taken as encourgement. He surely thinks I did not mean what I said.' Was that true?"

"No; not that; I felt only too sure that you were in earnest. I followed, at first, aimlessly; but when I saw you again,

the old madness came back. I stayed hoping to make you change your mind."

"Oh!" she murmured, catching her breath sobbingly, "did I not tell you that it was impossible? *Why* will you not give me up, hate me, anything but this. Do you not see all the harm I have wrought you? Don't you know that you are spoiling your life? You have followed me for half a year —from New York to this wretched place—and for what? Oh! have I been so bitterly to blame!"

The hands in her lap were tightly clenched, there was a sob in her throat, but her eyes were dry.

With a sudden passionate gesture, Philip Dalton sprang up, and again stood before her, his tones almost stern.

"Aileen Lorne," he said, "I did follow you from New York, and from place to place. That is true. But at first, and for months, I believed that you tolerated me, at least. You were kind; you permitted my services, my escort; indeed, you favored me—for during that time you never once accepted so much as a flower from any other man. I followed you hopefully, and with a purpose; and it was not until, at last believing that you were learning to care for me a little, I asked you to be my wife—it was not until *then* that you bade me go back; forbade me to follow you further."

A moment she bent her head, and then, seeming to control herself by a mighty effort she looked up and said:

"If I accepted your kindnesses, your friendship, and seemed blind to the fact that you *were* following me, it was because I never thought, I never dreamed, that you—cultured, traveled aristocrat that you are—would stoop to ask *me*—a poor, roving singer, a 'variety actress'—to be your wife."

"If you did not think this, in Heaven's name what did you think? What did you mean? or expect?"

"I thought"—her voice was very low, and her calm evidently forced—"I thought that you were amusing yourself, at first; and later, that you had yielded to a fancy that must wear itself out—for I believe you too proud, too far above me, to think of making me your wife; and too honorable to offer me your love on any other terms. Believing this, I meant to enjoy your society, your friendship, while I honestly could. As for what I *expected*—I expected that which has come—loss and loneliness such as I never felt before."

"Aileen Lorne," and again his hands went out to her, "do you know what you are saying?"

"Yes; I know what I am saying, and I will say it out. When I said I would not marry you, and gave you a dozen reasons, there was one that I did not give."

"And what was that?"

"That your welfare was dearer to me than my own; that I cared for you too much to link your fate with mine. Stop!" for he had made a sudden forward movement, his face radiant—"*stop!* You shall not touch me! You and I were never further apart than at this moment. Hear it, if you will, for the first and the last time. I loved you from the first; I have perjured myself before that Coroner and his jury for your sake; I will die for you, if need be. But you must not speak of love to me again. *You shall not.*"

For a long moment he stood gazing down at her, as if unable to comprehend her words. And then, suddenly, he became calm.

"Aileen," he said gravely, "forgive me; this is so new, so strange to me. Will you say it once again—just those three words, I will ask nothing else. Say once more that you care for me."

"*Care!* I LOVE YOU, Philip Dalton."

"Listen, dear. I shall not speak of this again; not ask for word or promise now—I cannot. But when the cloud that now hangs over me is dispersed, when my honor is cleared, if it ever is, then I shall come to you and repeat my question. I *will not* give you up. Your scruples, your barriers, cannot fence me out longer. I have your love: I will not lose *you*."

For a moment she sat staring at him strangely, and shivering as if his words had been blows. Then she seemed to dismiss the subject by a quick gesture.

"I will say no more," she said wearily. "We have nothing to do with the future. Is it true that you have declared your intentions of remaining here until Duke Selwyn's murderer is found?"

"Yes," he said, smiling and confident now; "it is true."

"Would anything, *anything*, induce you to change your mind?"

"Nothing, Aileen." He became suddenly grave. "Surely *you* could not expect me to run away from such a charge as this?"

"I do ask it," she said. "I ask you to go away at once—as far away as it is possible to escape: to India—anywhere—but go."

"Aileen!"

"Oh! yes; I know your argument—it would be the act of a coward; it would brand you with infamy; it would convince the world of your guilt. But why should you care for the opinion of these people—Jerry McAffery and his hangers-on; these miners and ruffians of the mountains? What will it matter to you, back there in your own world, among other people, that once, out here among the mountains, you were

Care! I *love* you, Philip Dalton!"—Page 279.

accused, wrongfully accused and by a band of social outcasts, of killing such a man as Duke Selwyn?"

"It will matter so much, dear, that I shall not go back to my world, as you call it, until this mystery is cleared up. Don't you see that I can't go back with this stigma upon me? And more than that, more than all else to me, I can't marry the woman I love, I can't even ask her to wait for me, until my name is cleared of all stain."

"Your *name!*" Her hands clenched each other until the nails cut deep into the pink flesh, and for a moment her features were convulsed. "Oh! you don't know what you are saying! Philip—Philip Dalton, it is the first favor I have asked of you—it will be the only one I shall ever ask. But I do ask this. By all that you are, by all that you hope, by your love for me, I ask you to go away from Caledonia."

"Aileen, if nothing else held me here, I would not go while you remain."

"Oh! I will go; I will go anywhere. I will go wherever you bid me, if you go first, and promise me never to come back."

"Would you go with *me*, Aileen?"

"With you? No; nor near you. When we have left Caledonia, we must never meet again; we never will!"

"Then let us both stay here. I can't understand you, Aileen, so I must wait and have patience—of faith in you I have more than enough."

"Faith in *me!* Oh! my God!"

"But I could wish you were somewhere else, Aileen; away from here, away from Mack's. If you will promise to go East—only so far as need be; to some quiet pleasant place—and wait there until this business is ended—"

"*Ended!*" What a queer emphasis she gave the echo of his word. "*Ended!* Once and for all, Philip Dalton, will you do what I beg? Remember, it is the one thing, the *only* thing, that I ever will ask."

"Aileen, you are morbid; something that you do not choose to explain is making you all this anxiety. What is it, darling; tell me, and let us kill it."

"Kill it!" What a bitter laugh she uttered. "Kill it! Philip, answer me, will you go away?"

"No, Aileen. Ask me anything but that."

"It is all I have to ask."

"You do not realize what it would be, to do as you wish. I cannot brand myself a coward. I cannot live all my life as a suspected murderer. It would be worse than death. Aileen!" —springing towards her suddenly—"how ghastly you look! Darling, don't let this grieve you so."

Ghastly? Yes; she looked like frozen marble. Her hands had fallen apart in her lap, her eyes stared straight before her, but she sat erect, and spoke in a slow mechanical fashion strange to hear.

"Worse than death?" she said. "Oh! yes; far worse, far worse!"

"Aileen, calm yourself. You take this too seriously. There is much to hope for."

Her hands moved restlessly, she turned her head from side to side.

"There is nothing to hope for," she said slowly; "nothing."

He was silent a moment, watching her wonderingly. Then, suddenly, light seemed to break upon his mental vision.

"Why," he exclaimed, "how very dull I am not to understand! Aileen, you have heard of this threatening, this talk

of lynch law, have you not? Is it this that has alarmed you for my safety?"

For some moments she was silent. Then she arose, and walked to the window, standing there with her back towards him. When at last she spoke her tone was less strained, she seemed to have recovered her self-possession.

"Yes," she said, "I have heard it. It *has* alarmed me."

"Then, I beg of you, do not heed this bluster, for it is nothing more. At the worst, I am not defenceless, not friendless. I have more champions here than I thought to find. And I have good hope, too, of discovering the truth; of fastening the guilt where it belongs."

He came to the window and stood near her there, but she kept her face averted.

"The gentleman who came with Miss Wray," he went on, "is an old acquaintance; a friend. He is worth a dozen men like Mack. And Doctor Mitchell has taken up the cudgels in my defense. Between us, we will sift this business to the bottom. My friend, Miss Wray's escort—" He hesitated, not wishing to call Vernet by name and disliking to deceive her even in this.

"Your friend?" she said. "I have seen your friend before. He is a detective."

"How do you know that?" he asked, surprised.

"He was pointed out to me, when I was in New York, as a person worth seeing. He had just performed some bold stroke of his trade and was more or less a lion. *He* is to find the true culprit for you? Well," turning towards him quickly, "I predict that he will succeed."

"Thanks, dearest. That means much to me—to *us*."

"Yes—" she was entirely calm now, and her tone and atti-

tude had almost a touch of defiance—"it means much—much!"

"Aileen," very gently, "was it about this—this business of lynching and like threats—that you wished to see me to-day?"

"Yes," quietly.

"And this is why you desired me to go away?"

Silence for a moment; then, again, quietly, "yes."

"Well, let us consider that settled; I can't go honorably. But there is nothing to keep you. Will *you* go, for my sake?"

"No," she said firmly; "consider *that* settled, too."

"But why, Aileen?"

"Your reasons are mine; I can't go 'honorably.'"

"Pshaw! do you mean without breaking your engagement at Mack's?"

"No matter what I mean. I shall stay until the end."

"Or until I go, Aileen?"

"Or until you go," she repeated mechanically.

"Aileen, I wish you would not sing at Mack's; you cannot like to do it."

"I hate it."

"Then stop it now."

"No; so long as I remain here, I shall sing at Mack's."

"But why, dearest?"

"Because—" She lifted her head and her eyes flashed upon him; then suddenly her gaze was averted, and she said, in an altered, almost sullen, tone: "I shall not tell you why."

When Philip Dalton, followed by Aileen, came out of the little parlor and opened the outer door, he was confronted upon the street by a rough-looking fellow in a red flannel shirt, and wearing his hat very much awry.

"Why!" ejaculated Dalton, and then stepped back involuntarily and glanced down at Aileen.

"S'kuse me, sir," said this personage glibly; "s'kuse me, Mr. Dalton; this is Mack's boardin'-house, ain't it?"

Dalton nodded, and Aileen came to the rescue.

"Do you wish to see some one?" she asked.

"I'm tryin' to find Old Pop," explained the visitor. "He lives here, I s'pose?"

"No;" answered Aileen, "Pop does not live here. He stays at the Theatre."

"Oh, thank ye," said the visitor; "much obliged. Sorry to a troubled ye. Good mornin', sir." And he turned and went stumbling down the steps.

"Why," said Aileen, gazing after him as he went, "surely that is—"

"One of the Coroner's jury," finished Dalton. "He's a queer genius. He calls himself Podunk."

CHAPTER XXXI.

OVER THE PRAIRIES.

When Philip Dalton came back to the hotel, walking slowly and absorbed with his own thoughts, he saw a light wagonette before the door. It was drawn by a fine pair of horses and had seats for four.

As he came nearer, Vernet ran down the steps, pulling on a gray glove. He saw Dalton, and stopped beside the wagonette.

"Oh, here you are, ch?" was his easy greeting. "I thought you were going to disappoint me."

"Perhaps I should have told you," said Dalton, half smiling, "that I had an engagement this morning." But he did not explain further.

Vernet smiled, too, but thought it best to ignore this remark, feeling assured that Dalton did not wish nor intend to enter into details.

"You evaded me last night; are you going to desert me now?" he said.

"No," replied Dalton; "I am quite at your service, although, of course"—with a side glance at his friend—"I perfectly understand your motive."

But this remark also, Vernet chose to ignore.

He had told Philip Dalton, the night before, when they were walking back together at a late hour from Doctor Mitchell's cottage, that he proposed seeing Miss Wray and Mountain Mag safely to Mag's home on the morrow, and had asked him to join the escort. And Dalton, thinking only of Aileen and uncertain how much of his time she might require, had answered evasively, a little to the surprise of Vernet.

"I think we are about ready," the latter said, securing his well-fitting glove and casting a critical glance at the harness. "Have you any preparation to make?"

"No; I think not. How is Miss Wray, this morning?"

"Quite calm and hopeful. For so delicate a creature, she is wonderfully brave." He spoke with a quick enthusiasm and Dalton turned upon him a keen glance.

"Take care, Vernet," he said half jestingly. "There are more dangers than one to be encountered here."

"And, to borrow a little of your own rhetoric, I should be a coward to run away."

"Well," responded Dalton, "I see that you recognize the danger."

The "danger" thus delicately alluded to, came down the steps at that moment—Barbara Wray, followed by Mountain Mag and Charley Carson. She gave her hand to Dalton in friendly greeting, and Vernet assisted her into the wagonette. She was followed by Mag, who disdained assistance. The two men took their places, and, nodding to Charlie, the party drove briskly away.

"At least," murmured Carson, as he stood gazing thoughtfully after them, "Mr. Dalton is out of harm's way for the present. I'm glad of that."

As he turned to reënter the house, he saw a man cross the street a little way down and come sauntering toward him.

"Here's that queer fellow, Podunk," he said to himself. "I'll have a little chat with him, to pass the time."

It was yet early, as time went in that place, and scarcely anyone was moving about the St. Charles.

Charley lounged upon the lower step, where he could command a view of the office, and waited.

"Good morning," he said, as Podunk approached. "Out of business, eh?"

Podunk, who had not seemed to see him, stopped short and appeared to consider.

"Wal, I ain't driven," he said finally. Then casting a look after the fast receding wagonette: "Taking a mornin' airin'?"

"Yes," said Charlie briefly.

Podunk sent a second look after Miss Wray's party and slowly shook his head.

"I don't know 'bout that business," he said dolefully. "I ain't clear in my mind that we didn't jest nachely put our foot into it."

"Into what?" asked Charlie.

"Inter that kind o' open verdict that we brung in."

"Oh, your jury? What kind of a verdict did *you* want?"

Charlie, who had heard of Podunk's hostility towards Dalton and promptly resented it, thought he now saw an opportunity to make a convert.

"Wal, I kinder wanted to see that slick fellow, Dalton, git the benefit of the thing."

"You mean you wanted him charged with the murder?"

Podunk nodded, and burrowed with his hands in his pockets.

"Look here—" Charlie spoke sharply and came down the two steps, thus putting himself on a level with Podunk—"I'd like to hear what *you* know about this business, that you should take such a stand against an honest gentleman. What have you got against Dalton?"

"Nawthin'," drawled Podunk, casting a quick glance from side to side.

"Then what do you mean?" demanded Charlie.

Podunk cast another look about him and came a step nearer.

"Say," he remarked in a lower tone, "be ye 'on watch' now?"

"No; I put a man in my stead while I saw that Mr. Dalton and his friends got their team, and a safe start."

"Have ye got a place where ye can take a man that's got anything pertickler and private to say to ye, where there won't be no interruptin'?"

"I've got a room," replied Charlie, a trifle coldly, "and

there wouldn't be much danger of interruption anywhere, at this hour."

"Then," said Podunk, touching him lightly upon the arm, "s'pose you take me to ye'r room. I want a little talk with you."

"Umph! If you want to tell me that you think Dalton's guilty, you've got hold of the wrong man, Mr. Podunk."

"And if you think I don't know what I'm about, *you've* got hold of the wrong man, Mr. Carson."

The words were low spoken, and there was no trace of the man Podunk in the look which accompanied them; a look keen, intelligent, straight into the eyes of Charlie Carson, who started and was about to utter an exclamation.

"Hush," said Podunk, anticipating him. "If you are a friend to Philip Dalton, the quicker we understand each other the better."

Charlie was startled, but he was not dull.

"Come," he said turning toward the door; "follow me."

The stout team attached to the light conveyance, carried Miss Wray and her friends swiftly over the smooth prairie. The air was exhilirating, calm sunshine overhead, fresh spring turf beneath the horses' feet. The trail they traversed was little worn, and Mountain Mag was often called upon to decide whether it was really a trail at all. Their way lay to the south-east, over a softly undulating prairie, with only one small stream to cross. A few miles to the eastward stretched a long belt of timber. Beyond, in the direction of the ranch, all was open to the mountains in the distance. And west and south-west again, stretched the timber land, a long dusky line, with the mountains, here barren rock and there tree clad, rising high behind it.

They were not a talkative party but they were all, for different reasons, very observant of each other, and the scene about them.

"You seem to be midway between those two belts of timber, Miss Drood," said Dalton addressing Mag over his shoulder.

"Yes," replied Mag; "my father preferred the mountains to live among. He left them more on my account than his own."

"I should not think," said Miss Wray, "that the mountains would have been very safe for you."

"So my father feared," said Mag, "although I've always been safe enough anywhere."

"Miss Drood is a good shot," put in Vernet at this point. "Ask her to show you what she can do in that line, Miss Wray."

"I surely will," said Barbara in a tone so emphatic that it made them all laugh.

"Are you afraid of firearms, Miss Wray?" asked Mag.

"I don't know whether I am or not," said Barbara candidly. "I never touched a weapon. When you have nothing better to do, we will find out."

"Do you ride?" asked Mountain Mag of Barbara, after a short silence.

"Oh, yes; and I'm very fond of a good horse."

"Well, I can furnish you with one. And there's plenty of riding over these prairies."

"I should think so," gazing about her. "And I should like to ride to those woods."

"Before you go there," said Mag slowly, "you had better learn to shoot."

"Oh!" cried Barbara, "is it there?" And then she stopped suddenly, and said under her breath: "My poor father!"

She had schooled herself to patience, knowing that they would do all that they could—all that any one could—to find her father. And she was bravely trying to keep down her anxiety, and not to yield to the fears that assailed her. She was silent for a moment, and then, leaning forward, she addressed Vernet.

"Mr. Morgan, in which of these woods did you encounter the stage robbers?"

"Spare me, Miss Wray," he said turning to look at her. "I didn't encounter the stage robbers; I simply ran away from them. I assure you I did not pause for one second."

"Oh," said Mag, "we all understand *that*. Old Morris laid on the whip when he saw them ahead, and ran the horses past them."

"How was that?" asked Dalton.

"It appears," replied Vernet, "that he had studied out a line of conduct. He had been stopped twice, and been severely blamed for not showing more fight. He was determined not to fight, but thought he would see what his horses could do to help him out. It was a new trick and surprised the robbers, I fancy, as much as it did me."

"We must try again," said Dalton. "The next time you go up the mountain, I'll go with you."

"Good!" exclaimed Vernet.

They were now half way to the ranch, and before them was a small elevation which effectually concealed the creek that they must cross, and the trail beyond. As they came slowly up the hill, they saw two men watering their horses at the creek below them. As they began the descent, the two

horsemen crossed the stream and came slowly toward them.

Dalton and Vernet, following the fashion of the country, saluted them as they passed, receiving in return two nods of the head that were next to imperceptible.

Nothing was said until the wagonette had crossed the creek, and then Mountain Mag leaned forward and touched Vernet's arm.

"I saw you looking at those two men," she began hesitatingly.

"Yes," he said; "I look at everybody here. I make it a duty."

"Why?"

"Why?" with a laugh. "I am a sight-seer, Miss Drood. I came to see everything."

"Do you think you would know those men again?" persisted Mag seriously.

"I think I have seen one of them somewhere. Yes; I would know them anywhere. I'm very observant, I assure you."

"I'm glad of it," said Mag.

"Why? Do you know them?"

"Yes; I know them. They are two of the Regulators."

"Oh! They're coming from your direction, Miss Drood."

"They're not coming from my ranch," said Mag positively. "They wouldn't find any one to welcome them there."

"May I ask why?"

"Because I won't have them about, if they *are* Regulators. I don't see what Connolley means by enlisting such men as Hedley and Pete Finlayson."

"Why," said Vernet, struck by a sudden thought, "if they haven't been to your place, where *have* they been?"

He turned to get a better view of Mag's face, and their eyes met for just one instant. Then Mag sank back in her seat, as if to end the discussion.

"If they've been to my place," she said briefly, "we'll soon know it."

Her glance traveled past Miss Wray, who was looking wistfully at a distant mountain peak, and rested upon Philip Dalton, who was gazing straight before him and seemed lost in thought.

"Hedley—Finlayson," said Vernet to himself, as he turned his face to the horses and shook the reins lightly. "Those are the two Regulators who wanted Miss Lorne questioned, and who are Mack's right hand men. I must talk with the Doctor about them."

Doctor Mitchell, it should be explained, had told the two detectives how Connolley had requested that Miss Lorne be recalled, and had given them the names of Hedley and Finlayson.

Mountain Mag's home was a low, rambling structure, built and enlarged as the needs of its occupants increased. It could lay no claims to architectural beauty. It was "all on the ground," but there was room enough and to spare. It was simply furnished, with a view to use and some degree of comfort. And Barbara Wray was pleased to note the nice order, the perfect neatness of everything, within and without.

Dalton and Vernet had very willingly accepted Mag's invitation to stay to dinner, and all three of her guests spent a little time in walking about, viewing the well ordered place. When they were within, and waiting the call to dinner, Vernet said to Barbara:

"Before we go back, Miss Wray, I want a little information about your father."

"Anything; ask me everything," she said eagerly.

"First, then, have you a picture of him?"

"Oh, a very good one: Mr. Dalton will tell you so. It is in my trunk, which will be here soon, I suppose."

"Well, perhaps, not before we leave; but we can come again. And have you those letters from your father—the ones sent you immediately after his arrival in Caledonia?"

"Yes; all of them, I think."

"When you wrote to your father, how did you address him?"

"I did not write to him. His instructions were, not to write. He would write me frequently, to inform me of his welfare, and he could be tolerably sure of mine, among friends as I was."

Vernet was silent, and his look one of surprise.

"Did he make this arrangement before leaving home?" he asked finally.

"No; his first letter contained his instructions."

There was another interval of silence, and then Vernet asked:

"Miss Wray, will you trust me with your father's picture and those letters?"

"Oh, yes; anything!" She caught her breath, as if she would keep back some impetuous words, and then suddenly yielded to the impulse that swayed her. "Won't you tell me what you think?" she cried. "Your request means something, I know."

"I have only one definite idea, Miss Wray," Vernet said gravely, "and that may yet turn out a wrong one. It is, that your father, after leaving his home—after reaching this place,

perhaps—found some reason for concealing his identity by assuming another name."

"Oh! And why do you think that?"

"Because his name does not appear on any of the registers. No one seems to have heard of such a person here. Now if your father wrote you several times from Caledonia, if he was here a week or more, we would find some trace of him if he went by the name of Stephen Wray."

"True," she said; "I did not think of that."

"I would like to know," went on Verhet, "something about your father, Miss Wray; his temper, his disposition. Was he at all inclined to be venturesome; to take risks?"

"My father was a man of strong will. If he saw fit to do a thing, that was reason enough to him why it should be done. He was not a coward; not a man to give up easily."

"Suppose—and mind this is *only* a supposition; you are not to be alarmed at it—suppose that some man or men, knowing your father's wealth, had been able to get him into their power, their object being to extort a large sum of money by way of ransom—what do you think he would be likely to do?"

She was silent a moment, and then her head went up proudly, and her eyes rested full upon his face.

"He would laugh at their demands," she said. "I am sure of it. He would not be intimidated." She looked at him earnestly, as if longing to ask something, but held her peace and waited for his next question. It came after another interval of silence.

"Do you know whether your father brought with him any large sum of money, or any valuable papers?"

"Yes; he brought money—quite a sum—and negotiable papers of considerable value."

CHAPTER XXXII.

ALMOST AN ADVENTURE.

A short time before their departure, Mountain Mag approached Vernet and said:

"I would like to show you some guns that I have."

"By all means," said Vernet, and followed her at once from the room.

Mag did not affect a display of her weapons; she knew nothing of such use, or lack of use, for firearms. She led him to the long narrow room in which they had dined, and threw open a closet door.

"Why," exclaimed Vernet, "you keep an arsenal!"

"Yes," said Mag grimly; "they don't eat nor drink, and they might come handy. 'A store's no sore,' my father used to say; and folks in this country don't think none the less of you through knowing that you keep a lot of guns, and understand how to use them."

Vernet started at a thought which suddenly presented itself.

"Miss Drood," he said, "is there a possibility of an attack upon your place? Has it ever happened?"

Mag smiled. "No," she said; "it's never happened *yet*; my father, in his day, wasn't a man to be trifled with. No; we've never been molested. Everybody knows that Michael Drood's guns shoot true, and that they weren't buried with him." She laid her hand upon a fine rifle and drew it from

its place. "This was my father's pet gun," she said, "and I'm going to lend it to you."

"Thanks, Miss Drood,—" taking the weapon from her hand and examining it critically—"it is a fine gun; but I have a Winchester at the St. Charles, and a very good one."

"But," said Mag, looking steadily at him, "you haven't it *here*."

"Miss Drood," said Vernet, coming a step nearer her, "I have known you long enough to feel sure that your words mean something. What is it?"

"I mean that I want you to take this gun with you to-day, and Mr. Dalton must take *this*."

She drew from the closet a second rifle, and held it toward him.

"But Dalton and I are well armed, Miss Margaret."

"With pistols?"

"Yes."

"Listen; there are men in Caledonia who want to see Mr. Dalton out of the way, and it would be a simple thing for some one who knows that you two will drive over the prairie alone, to ride out, meet you, and shoot one or both. Pistols are good weapons at close range, but if you see two or three men coming toward you, and show them a rifle, they will be apt to keep out of danger, especially if *they* carry only pistols. That's the way they'd be armed, I dare say; and they'd have an advantage over you in being on horseback. You'll take the guns?"

"Yes," replied Vernet soberly; "we will take the guns. Thank you, Miss Drood."

When they had said adieu to Miss Wray and were ready to start, Mag brought out the rifles with her own hands.

"They're well loaded," she said as she passed them, one at a time, up to Vernet.

"Guns!" exclaimed Dalton as they drove away; "are we going to hunt, old man?"

"Perhaps," said Vernet, giving his entire attention to the eager horses, and saying no more until they were some distance from the ranch. Then he told his companion what had passed between himself and Mountain Mag, on the subject of the guns.

"Do you think it means anything more than a woman's caution?" asked Dalton, after a moment's reflection.

"Yes. Mag is intensely practical. She is not given to vain imaginings. I think she acted upon some knowledge or suspicion that she holds."

There was another thoughtful pause, during which Dalton examined Michael Drood's rifle with the eye of a *connoisseur*. Then:

"Do you think that Mountain Mag knows where to look for Cool Hank?" he asked.

"I can't tell what to think. Mag knows more than she means to explain. But I'm convinced of one thing: she is to be trusted. If worst comes, she will be found on the right side. If Mag is seeking to defend Hank Dutton, it's because she has faith in him."

"Faith in him!" The words recalled to Dalton's mind his morning's meeting with Aileen Lorne. He rested the rifle between his knees, and relapsed into reverie.

As they sped on over the gently undulating prairie, Vernet from time to time stole a glance at his face; and if he had spoken his thoughts, he would have said:

"Ah, my friend Dalton, Mountain Mag is not the only

one who deals in mystery, and keeps back the best half of the story!"

To do Dalton justice, he was sensible of the value of Vernet's friendship, and esteemed him entitled to his fullest confidence. Had he consulted only his own will, he would have told Vernet all the story of his love for Aileen and his reckless pursuit of her. But before, there had been no suitable opportunity; and now, since the morning, and his talk with Aileen, he felt that the story was not his own—that although she had not said it, she did not wish their secret shared with another, not even if so good a friend as Vernet was sure to prove.

Such reflections as these made him more than usually quiet, and for some time they drove on in silence. They were not far from the creek were they had met the two Regulators, and Vernet was driving briskly, and keeping a watchful eye upon the horizon all about him, while Dalton mused and saw nothing, when the latter roused himself to say:

"I'm bad company to-day, Vernet. Here—" proffering his cigar-case,—"take one; it may prove stimulating."

But Vernet, casting a side glance at the proffered weeds, shook his head.

"I believe I won't smoke," he said. "Poor fellow! if my eyes don't deceive me, those are Caledonians; and *have* you come to this? All the rest is nothing in comparison, but Phil Dalton smoking Caledonia cigars is pathetic! It moves me to offer you a weed imported from God's country. Here, my boy, take it; enjoy it. Oh! how are the mighty fallen."

Dalton laughed at his friend's conceit, and helped himself from his cigar case.

"I believe it *is* an improvement," he admitted, as he lighted the cigar.

Vernet made no answer. His eyes, keen by nature and quickened by training, were fixed upon a dark object straight ahead, at the top of the hill just beyond the stream they were approaching. It appeared like some small animal, he thought, but when they were a little nearer, he put out his hand and proffered the reins to Dalton.

"I believe I *will* smoke." he said quietly.

Dalton received the reins without comment, and Vernet took out a cigar and stuck it between his lips. But he did not light it until he had lifted Michael Drood's rifle and laid it across his knees. Then he coolly lighted his cigar, keeping his eyes fixed constantly upon the dark object at the top of the hill.

"Ease up a little," he said quietly, when they were nearing the creek.

Dalton brought the horses to a steady walk, and turned to ask the meaning of his friend's sudden command. He saw Vernet rise from the seat, raise the rifle to his shoulder, and take deliberate aim.

"What are you doing?" cried Dalton amazed.

"Keep cool," replied Vernet, himself the incarnation of coolness. "There's something moving at the top of that hill; and as there are no anacondas nor diamond snakes here, I think it must be a man crawling on his stomach."

"Oh!" ejaculated Dalton, darting a quick glance up the hill. "By Jove, you're right! He sees you, too. Don't fire, Van. Let the fellow go."

"He isn't alone; don't think it," said Vernet, still sighting his rifle. "He's got friends behind that hill. Hello!"

He lowered his gun and laughed aloud. The man upon the hill top had risen to his feet, and scampered out of sight be-

hind the hill. Vernet resumed his seat but kept the rifle in readiness.

"I think this is what Mountain Mag prepared us for," he said. "Drive steadily up the hill, old man, and be ready to stop at the word. Keep both hands on your reins. If I should fire—"

"Humph!" ejaculated Dalton, "you won't need to fire, if that fellow is a sample of what remains behind."

They crossed the creek and drove slowly up the hill, seeing nothing. At the top, Dalton broke into a laugh.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing with his whip where four mounted men were riding across the prairie, away from them and toward the west, at a breakneck gallop.

"If I were mounted," cried Vernet, "I'd follow; I'd run them down!" He rose again in his seat and looked after them wistfully.

"To shoot them?" queried Dalton. "You can't consistently shoot men for crawling on their bellies, and galloping over the prairies, can you?"

"To see them," said Vernet, sitting down. "One glance might help me to considerable knowledge. This is the second time that spies, or worse, have got out of our way before I could put my mark of identification on them."

"The second?" echoed Dalton.

"Yes. Have you forgotten the fellow you caught under Mitchell's window last night? I'm sorry Charlie Carson failed to run him down."

"It was not Charlie's fault," said Dalton.

"Certainly not. None the less it's our misfortune."

Charlie Carson had reported his success, or lack of it, to Dalton that morning. He had followed the spy, who had

broken away from Dalton's grasp under the window of Doctor Mitchell's cottage, until they were near to Mack's Theatre. Both men were running rapidly, when something in the path caused Carson to stumble and fall. When he regained his feet, and was able to look about him, the fellow had disappeared.

"If the Doctor had brought the lamp to the door at first—" began Dalton.

"If, and if, and if," ejaculated Vernet.

Dalton was silent a moment; then suddenly he started:

"I begin to think that I am very stupid," he exclaimed.

"Oh, you are? And why?"

"When we were clinching each other there, I got hold of one of the fellow's hands. I think—in fact I am sure—from the position, that it must have been the right hand. And it was covered with big, hard, round lumps—"

"Warts?" suggested Vernet.

"Why, of course! It must have been! And I never thought to mention this before."

"Well," commented Vernet, "you were—" Evidently he was about to say "stupid," but he changed his intentions and said, instead, "preoccupied."

Dalton glanced at him sidewise; but Vernet was looking straight ahead and saying to himself, "I must tell Dick of those warts at once."

"You are right," Dalton said; "I *was* preoccupied. But it's very good of you to call it by so mild a name."

"Oh," said Vernet laughing, "my goodness was an afterthought; moderate your gratitude."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"SIGNS AND OMENS."

Duke Selwyn was buried that afternoon; and Vernet and Dalton arrived in time to join the throng which gathered about his grave. When it was over, there was a scattering, and then an almost immediate gathering together, in knots and groups in divers places, of such choice spirits as were mutually attracted toward each other.

There was very little loud talk among these groups, but they talked a great deal, and seemed very much in earnest.

To Vernet, this evident stir, coupled with the unusual absence of noise, seemed ominous. He had not met Podunk since the morning, and he had only seen Doctor Mitchell at a distance, in the crowd about Selwyn's grave. He felt restless and uneasy, and kept a constant watch upon Dalton, who smoked in the office and seemed the more unconcerned of the two.

At dusk, Vernet took a sudden resolve and set out alone for the Doctor's cottage. Before he had gone half way he saw the tall form of the Doctor approaching, and the two, meeting, expressed their mutual anxiety in the single syllable simultaneously uttered:

"Well?"

"Is it well?" queried Vernet, turning and pacing back toward the hotel by the Doctor's side. "I feel uneasy. I was seeking you."

"For what?" inquired the Doctor.

"To ask you to help me keep an eye on Dalton. I'm afraid of a demonstration to-night, and Dalton's in a reckless mood. I don't believe he'll *try* to be prudent."

"I was coming to look up this business," said Doctor Mitchell.

"There will naturally be more or less uproar to-night. We must go well armed, and keep Dalton with us. Have you seen your friend Podunk since morning?"

"No. But he'll be sure to turn up if danger threatens."

As they neared the hotel, they saw a slender figure glide down the steps and move away in the direction of Mack's.

"Wasn't that Father Miles?" asked the Doctor of Charlie, who came out just as they reached the lowest step.

"Yes."

"Umph!" ejaculated the Doctor. "Odd to see *him* here."

"He's been about town all day," volunteered Charlie; "something new for the good Father. I've seen him loitering and listening in half a dozen places. Early this afternoon he had a long talk with that fellow Podunk."

"Umph!" grunted Doctor Mitchell, and passed on into the office, where Dalton still sat and smoked.

But Vernet did not follow him. He stopped in response to a signal from Charlie Carson, who stood between him and the office door, grinning broadly.

"Your friend told me to tell you that he intended to spend most of the night at Mack's," he remarked in a low voice. "He said if he was wanted you'd find him there."

"What friend?" asked Vernet.

"Podunk," said Charlie, still grinning; "*or Stanhope.*"

"Oh!" said Vernet, his eye lighting; "so *you* have come into the ring?"

"Yes; I'm in the ring. I'm going to see it through."

The two men looked straight into each other's faces for a moment. And then, as if satisfied with their scrutiny, Vernet said:

"We're glad to have you with us, Carson. Will you smoke?"

Charlie accepted the proffered cigar, and the two entered the office.

As the moments passed, the evil signs increased. From time to time dark faces peered in at the office door, and then vanished instantly. Whispering groups passed the hotel, halted before the entrance, peered about them and conversed briefly, while one of their number thrust his face for a moment in at the door or up against a convenient window pane. At certain street corners clusters of men talked animatedly, invariably stopping and remaining silent while any chance passer-by was within hearing.

It was only at Mack's that things seemed very much as usual. The Theatre had been closed for forty-eight hours, but to-night all the lamps were aglow. The bar was doing its customary lively business. At the usual time, a blare of not too harmonious instruments told all Caledonia, quite unnecessarily, that Mack's was in full blast.

Mack was flying about the place as was his wont; now speaking sharp words of advice or reprimand to his barkeepers, above and below; now greeting a new comer, or a profitable old customer, with effusion; now arguing with his stage manager; now diving behind the scenes, and swearing, in this privacy, quite unreservedly at whatever had gone wrong; then bouncing out again, beaming and bowing and rubbing his hands for the benefit of the increasing public—for

Mack had a *role*, as well as his performers, and he played it better than most of his people did theirs.

Another thing was noticeable, to a person looking out for signs by which to gauge the popular pulse: none of the Regulators, who, for two days, had been so conspicuous as a body, were to be seen, except singly, as detached individuals. And of these, even, few were visible. As for Connolley, he was notably conspicuous by his absence from all of his accustomed haunts.

While the band was braying in front of Mack's, calling his votaries together, the loungers in the office of the St. Charles were, one and all, surprised to see the outer door open and Father Miles enter slowly and sedately. Their surprise grew as without any seeming purpose, except to pass the time as the others were doing, he seated himself and began to look about with mild interest, making no attempt to converse. After a time, Charlie Carson paused near him, and Father Miles put out his hand with a detaining gesture.

"My son," he said, "can you give me a room in your house to-night?"

Charlie looked grave, and then his face brightened.

"If I can't otherwise, you shall have mine, Father Miles," he said.

"If I may share it with you," said the good man, "I will accept your kindness."

"Have it as you like," answered the young man, "but I don't much expect to see a bed to-night."

Father Miles scanned his face for a moment, and then turned away, sighing softly.

After a time, Doctor Mitchell, who had been conversing with Dalton, came and sat down at the Father's side.

"It's not often we have you among us wordly folks like this," he said in his usual blunt fashion.

"No," said the Father gently. And then he added, in a still lower tone: "But there are times when a man should be something more than a priest."

Doctor Mitchell suppressed the "Umph!" that rose naturally to his lips when no other fitting word occurred to him, and said instead, "Oh—ah."

"I don't see clearly what I can do," went on Father Miles, "but if that young man is menaced to-night"—he nodded toward Dalton as he spoke—"I could not stand aside while the wrong was done."

Doctor Mitchell stared in astonishment, and then his eyes brightened.

"Why," he said, "then there are six of us!"

"Six?"

"Yes. But you will see. What is it, Charlie?" for Charlie had approached and touched him lightly upon the arm.

"I don't like the way things are looking," Charlie said. And then he glanced at the Priest.

"Go on, Charlie," said the Doctor. "Father Miles is with us."

"Is he? Well, I rather suspected it. Now, hadn't I better go out and take a peep around? go down to Mack's, say?"

"Wait a second," replied the Doctor. And watching his opportunity, he signalled Vernet to join them.

At the same time Father Miles crossed the room, and, seating himself beside Dalton, entered into conversation.

For a few moments, the three conferred together. The office was nearly deserted, and they were quite alone on that

side of the room. Finally the Doctor resumed the seat he had occupied near Dalton, and Vernet and Charlie Carson went out one after the other.

It was nearly an hour before they came back, and then the Doctor, Dalton and Father Miles were the sole occupants of the place. All the other *habitues*, drawn by the strange, silent magnet stirring the atmosphere without, either through fear, curiosity, or motives of prudence had gone, like Sister Anne, "to spy what she could from the watch tower."

Charlie was the first to return. Before speaking, he looked about the office, opened the door beyond the counter that connected with a small private room, and then stuck his head out into the hall.

"Well?" said Doctor Mitchell, when he had completed his investigations; "how goes the night?"

"Dark," said Charlie, "and dubious."

At this moment Vernet entered, closely followed by Podunk.

"I met this person," said Vernet, speaking with an air of severity assumed for the benefit of Dalton and Father Miles. "One would think that he never *was* sober—" Podunk was certainly very unsteady on his legs—"but he seems in his right mind, and he says—." He glanced from Dalton to the Priest, and hesitated.

"What does he say?" broke in Dalton. "What is it, Podunk?"

"Misser Dalton," said Podunk with tipsy gravity, "I—I ain't got nothin' agin ye—nothin' agin nobody—but I don't like fusses. I allus keep out o'—fusses. But I—jes think its—s'my duty—ter tell yer—that—that there's a nigger in the fence. An' ye'd better look-look out."

"Do you mean," said Dalton, fixing a keen eye upon Podunk, who was playing his drunken *role* to the life, "do you mean that there's a mob gathering?"

Podunk wagged his head in emphatic assent.

"Where?"

"Wal, I guess when they break loose 'twon't be fur from *here*," replied Podunk.

"How soon?"

Podunk shook his head. "I didn't aim ter come in here," he said, looking from one to the other and backing toward the door, "but that gen'le'man—kind of insisted—"

"Brought him along by the collar," explained Charlie.

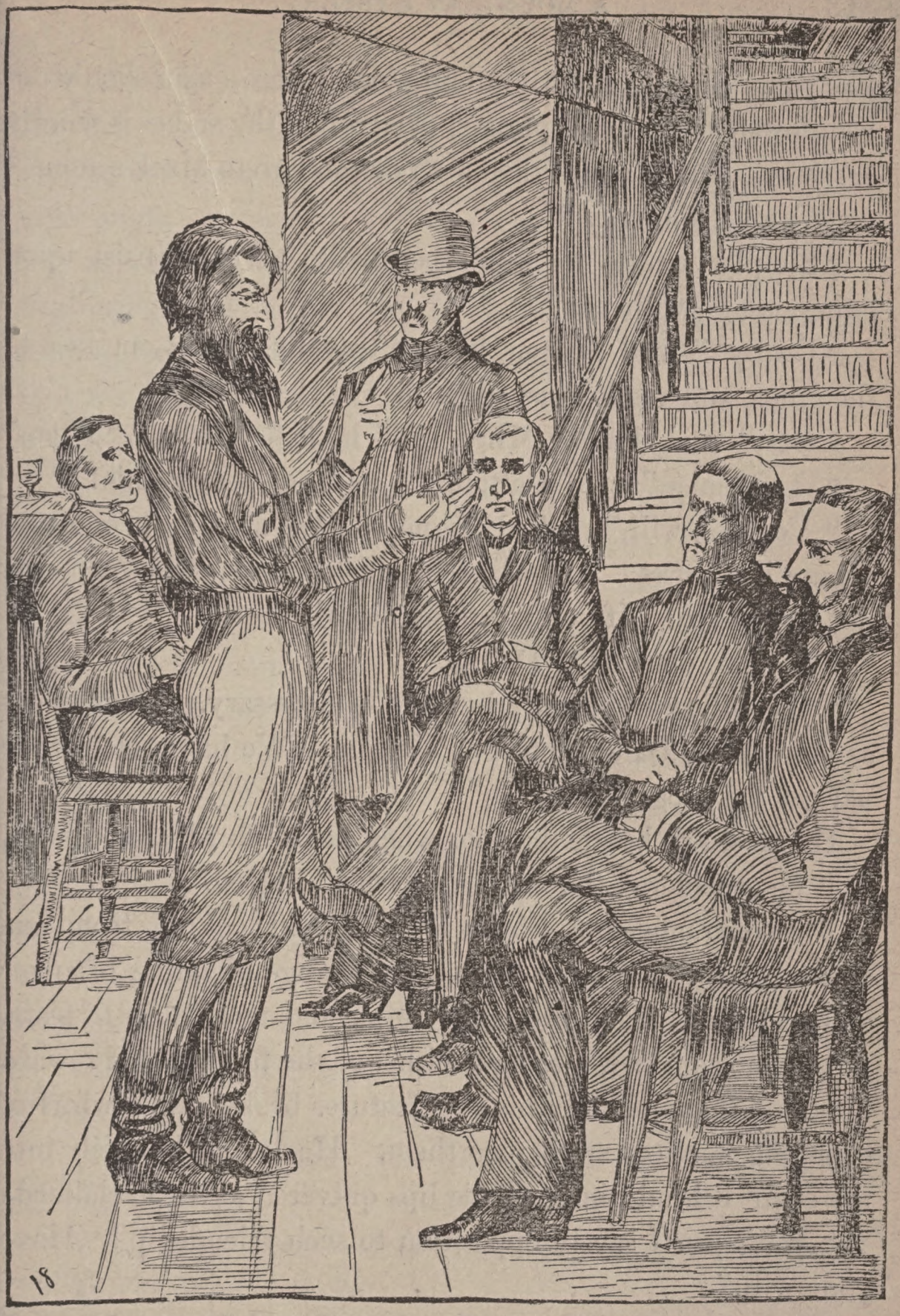
"Jes' so," said Podunk. "But I aint any earthly use in a skrimmage, so I guess I'll be goin'. I hate fitin'; it makes me nervous."

He backed out, and they heard him stumbling down the steps. In a moment the five men were on their feet, looking from one to another.

"Gentlemen," said Dalton finally, "I see by your faces that you mean to make my quarrel yours. I need not say now how much I appreciate it. But I cannot consent to drag you further with me. What would we be against a mob? You would only endanger yourselves uselessly. I am not afraid of these people, and I am well armed. I am going to show myself alone at Mack's, and let them do their worst."

Vernet and Doctor Mitchell exchanged quick glances; they had anticipated something like this. And then the masterful spirit of Vernet made itself felt. He wasted no time in vain argument, or friendly exhortation, but spoke as firmly as if he were threatening an enemy instead of coercing a friend.

"My dear fellow," he said, "that sounds like you. It *is*



"I didn't aim ter come in here, but that gentleman—kind of insisted—"
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like you. But there are times and places where a man should not be allowed to do as he pleases, even when the stake is wholly his own. This is one of them. You can't go to Mack's alone."

"Can't? and why?"

"Simply because we won't permit it. If you insist upon going, we go with you."

"Really?" said Dalton, his eye traveling from one face to the other, and resting last upon that of the Priest.

"Yes," said Father Miles, as if he had spoken; "I too."

"Gentlemen," cried Dalton, "I will not permit this!"

"Yes, you will," replied Vernet. "We are four to one, and we are in earnest. If you go to Mack's, as I hope you will not, we go too. If you try to go elsewhere—"

"Well?" demanded Dalton.

"We will prevent you; by force, if necessary. Be as angry as you please, Dalton, but don't argue. We have settled *our* part of the programme."

He sat down beside the door when he had finished speaking, as if he considered the matter "settled" indeed.

For some moments Philip Dalton stood looking from one countenance to the other, his own a strange blending of anger and something else; something softer and more akin to tears. He saw no sign of wavering in either of the faces turned toward him, and then suddenly his own features broke, and a whirl of changing emotions swept over them. He dropped heavily into the chair behind him, and his lips quivered as he exclaimed:

"What can I say in opposition to such friendship! Have your will."

"It's our will that you stay here," said Doctor Mitchell grimly; and Charlie Carson found something to trouble him in his throat, and walked to the door.

Podunk, who was rapidly making for himself a place among the "characters" of the town, had hung about Mack's all day; and he had satisfied himself that, however much the disaffected ones might scatter and seek to make it appear that the uprising against Philip Dalton was general, it had in reality its beginning, middle and end at Mack's. And he became convinced, too, that Mack's generalship was not to be despised; that his influence was far reaching, and his activity reduced to a well-working system.

He had stolen away from Mack's in the hope of seeing Vernet, and had met him, in company with Charlie Carson, half way between the Theatre and the hotel. They had conversed in low tones while Charlie did picket duty, and the brief dialogue was characteristic of the men.

"Well, partner?" were Vernet's first words.

"The deuce is to pay, Van. Where's Dalton?"

"At the St. Charles."

"Keep him there; and look out for squalls about midnight. I'll be on hand when the time comes, but I want to work by strategy as long as possible. Is Dalton prepared?"

"I don't think he fully realizes his danger. He's perfectly unconcerned."

"Oh, he is! Perhaps I'd better step in and speak a word of warning?"

"It might be wise. He thinks that we are too quickly alarmed, I fancy."

"Well, come along. *I'm* a reliable person, if I am tipsy."

"Still in liquor, eh?"

"Oh, yes. It's the easiest dodge down there. I've played drunk until I almost believe that I *am* drunk."

"By the way," said Vernet, when they had signaled to

Charlie and turned their faces toward the St. Charles, "I got a point from Dalton to-day: Keep your eyes open for a fellow with his hand covered with warts."

"Eh? What's that?"

"It occurred to Dalton to tell me that he got hold of that spy's hand last night, and it was decorated with something that felt like warts."

"Oh!" said Podunk, "I guess I've seen that hand."

"Are you sure, then, that there will be an actual personal attack to-night?" asked Vernet as they came near the hotel.

"There will be an attack, and it will be personal, and dangerous, unless between now and midnight there occurs something in the way of a diversion."

"How a diversion? Can't we create one?"

"I'd like to," said Podunk grimly. "But unless we feel like pistoling somebody, or burning half the town, we could not furnish them with entertainment sufficient to 'divert' them from their present purpose."

Nevertheless, and without driving them to the necessity of shooting their man, or firing the town, the much wished "diversion" came.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BLOOD AT DEATH PASS.

Many of us there are who know, only to well, what a great uprising is like; how men with no wish or thought in common save the burning desire to right a great wrong, or to drive from the face of the earth some monster who menaces home

and life and honor, will come together, as if by a mighty, simultaneous impulse, and stand shoulder to shoulder, a unit for vengeance, a law unto themselves.

We have heard the sound of such a multitude, rising to a roar, as its numbers increase; ever rising and swelling as boldly, in the face of day, they declare their will, march to their goal, and strike their blow. Such a spectacle has sometimes reached the sublime, and it has not been utterly devoid of courage and manliness.

But the mob that organizes by stealth; that plots its deed of blood in darkness and with crape-concealed faces; that creeps upon its victim with the stealth of the serpent but strikes without so much as a hiss of warning—that is the most hideous spectacle of all, with no saving grace of courage, sublimity or manliness. It is the human serpent, striking with its fangs blasphemously in the name of Justice.

It is such a mob as this that gathers in the street just below the St. Charles; gathers slowly, silently, by twos and threes and half dozens; each man with his face concealed, each heart bent on bloodshed. A few there are who are earnestly intent upon wreaking vengeance upon the man they believe to be Duke Selwyn's murderer. Others simply follow the cue given by a recognized patron and leader. Some are bribed, and the ranks of these are swelled by the usual outcast, reckless horde, ever ready to lend themselves to deeds of iniquity.

In more than one drinking hell, whiskey has flowed freely to-night, making the reckless yet more reckless, the bloodthirsty more cruel still.

How silent they all are now, as they move steadily forward, bent on their murderous deed! They are very sure of their

victim. They know he is within reach. They have planned a surprise, and the moment has come.

The leaders of the party, six masked men, go forward now in advance of the rest, reach the steps of the hotel, and then pause suddenly.

Something has turned the nearest corner, rattling, creaking, with a big red eye high aloft.

Instinctively the six men pause. It is the incoming Rockville stage, and as they look the voice of the driver rings out:

"Help, here! hallo! *help!* HELP! *Murder and robbery at Death Pass!*"

The words are heard within. The door is flung wide open, and the light streams out. Instantly the six maskers slink back into the shadows.

"*Help!*" again cries the voice; "*two passengers dying; one dead!*"

"That's Dan Strong's voice," whispered one of the six; and the others see that he is removing his mask, and quickly follow his example.

From the doorway above them, a slender figure emerges now—Father Miles, bareheaded, and with anxious face. Charlie follows him, with a light, and they both peer in at the occupants of the stage. The man upon the box springs down, and stands for a moment in the broad band of light that shines through the open door. As he stands thus, one of the mob of masked men lingering in the rear, sees him, and says aloud:

"It's Dan Strong, sure."

"It's Dan Strong," repeats another, and the name is passed from mouth to mouth.

In a moment more every face is unmasked, and the crowd is pressing around the coach, gaping uselessly and asking eager

"Help, here! hello! *help!* HELP! *murder and robbery at Death Pass!*"—
—Page 316.

questions, while Philip Dalton, their intended victim, helps Dan Strong and Father Miles to lift out the first wounded man, who is covered with blood and moaning piteously. They lay him gently upon the office floor, and Doctor Mitchell, Vernet and Charlie Carson bring in the second man.

When they lift out the third, Dan Strong says:

"Poor Morris! He showed fight, and they shot him on his box."

Morris was the oldest and truest of the Rockville drivers, and he had been shot dead—riddled with bullets.

Philip Dalton is reprieved; at least for this night. The mob, a moment before one in desire and intent, becomes divided. A few there are who would urge them on to the fulfilment of their purpose, but they see the hopelessness of such an effort and wisely desist. A new sensation has turned the thoughts of the majority into another channel. They are as eager now to hear all that Dan Strong has to tell, as they were, a moment since, to drag Philip Dalton to his death.

Dan Strong is a Rockville miner, well known, respected, feared; much such a man as Connolley, but possessing, together with his hardihood and rugged honesty, a keener insight into men and things. That Dan Strong is roused to wrath and to action now, is evident to all that see the dark shade upon his brow, the fire in his eye, the set firmness of the thin-lipped mouth, and who know the man.

As he moves about, seeing that the wounded men are carefully placed, and caring for the jaded animals that have brought the coach so gallantly through, he has no answer to question or comment from the men about him. He exchanges a few quick words with Doctor Mitchell as they bend together over the prostrate body of one of the wounded men, and he nods

intelligently in answer to something said by the Doctor, whose hands, while he speaks, move busily, cutting away the clothing and searching for the wounds.

Charlie has barred out the crowd, and they are pressing against each other, their numbers increased from moment to moment by those who come from neighboring saloons.

By and by, Strong rises and nods to Charlie. Then the door is thrown open and the men outside press close upon each other, eager to hear and to see. But Dan Strong, standing upon the threshold, waves them back, and frowns down upon them darkly.

"Men," he says, lifting his voice so that it may be heard far up and down the street, "I am going to Mack's, and any one that wants to hear what I've got to say, had better follow me—the more the better. There's been some bloody work done to-night, and there's goin' to be more before long, if I've got anything to say about it. If you've a mind, any of you, to do honest huntin', instead of crawlin' around dark corners to mob a single man, go to Mack's an' let us know what yer made of. The time's come in these diggin's when every man that ain't known to be *for* the right is goin' to be counted *agin* it. And, one way or another, we want yer to take yer stand. Go along, now. Tell Jerry McAffery that Dan Strong's comin', and that he'll want the whole of his stage."

Dan Strong is a power in Rockville, and even his name has its weight here in Caledonia. Some of the mob begin to move away in the direction of Mack's, obedient to his bidding, and eager to tell the startling news. Others remain sturdily at their posts until Strong comes down the steps, and without so much as a glance at any of them walks quickly toward the Theatre.

Perhaps Jerry McAffery is surprised to see Dan Strong march into his saloon with the mob of lynchers, unmasked now, and trying to look like decent, law-abiding citizens, at his heels. Perhaps, too, he is disappointed, filled with baffled rage at the sight. If so, he conceals his real feeling tolerably well. But be this as it may, it is certain that he starts and looks confused for just an instant, when Strong approaches him and abruptly asks:

"Where's Connolley?"

"He's asleep," says Mack, recovering himself, "in my private office."

"Where's Cool Hank?"

Mack shoots a glance about him, and then whispers behind his hand:

"Missing; under a cloud!"

"Bah! And the Regulators?"

"Most of them laying by, I reckon. The boys have been on hard duty for two days and nights. Come this way and I'll tell you about it."

"Not now. I know that somebody has shot Selwyn, and that a mob has been organized to hang a man for the murder, after the Coroner's jury has discharged him, or as good as that. I want your stage, Mack, as soon as the performance is over."

"S's'h!" whispers Mack, seeing, over Strong's shoulder, that several of his guests are within earshot; "come this way."

He seizes Strong by the lapel of his coat, and so leads him into the gambling-room. For a few moments they converse in whispers, Mack looking anxious, and Strong resolute. Then they come out and go together through the long, narrow passage, with its litter of lumber and trappings, to the stage door, and thence on until they stand in one of the wings.

Billy Piper, temporary stage manager, filling the place of the gentleman who is sleeping off a debauch in the dressing-room below, moves toward them.

"As soon as Duncan comes off, Billy, I want to make an announcement," says Mack.

"*I'll* do that," breaks in Strong. "Just leave it to me."

Mack looks reluctant, but submits. And when Kit Duncan has executed her parting skip and disappeared behind a painted wing at the left, Dan Strong, rough-garbed, blood-stained, grimy and stern-visaged, steps out from the wing at the right. The effect is so grotesque, so surprising, that it causes the devotees before the footlights to break out into prolonged applause.

Strong only frowns the more, and stands grimly waiting until he can make himself heard. When they are quiet again he speaks.

"I want to say just one word now, and this is it. I want you, one and all, to stay in your places when the show is out, and let *me* entertain you a little while. I've got something important to say to every one of you."

There is one more "turn" on Mack's programme, but the audience pays little attention to the stage. While La Belle Florine sings a ballad in a cracked and piping voice, they whisper and wonder and guess, and stare at the lynchers, who, by twos and threes again, just as they had gathered to assail Dalton, come quietly into the auditorium, crowding together in the rear of the room and filling up the doorway.

When the curtain falls, Strong comes out, and standing there before it, a sinister figure against the gaudily painted background, begins abruptly.

"I've got a story to tell you all, and I won't make it long."

"Go, ahead, Strong," shouts a voice from the crowd; "take your time."

"That's just what I begrudge myself—my time," said Strong. "I want to be somewhere else this minute, with a gun on my shoulder and my belt stuck full of pistols. I've been robbed to-night in Death Pass. I've seen one man killed, and two more wounded and as good as dead. All this happened not twelve miles from Caledonia, and it riles me a little to come here and see you all like this—half the town roostin' here listenin' to Mack's fiddlers, and the other half trying to hound down a stranger because he's suspected of having shot somebody—only suspected, mind—while the Regulators are all snoozing and letting robbery and murder come to pass under their very noses! I don't like the look of it! It's a bad record for you Caledonians. Yesterday morning I left Rockville in the stage comin' east, with Billy Morris holding the reins. There were two miners, who had made a neat little stake and were starting back to God's country, hopeful and happy as boys out o' school. Then there was two others; fellows that had been a year or more in Rockville, and that had been considered fair and square men. Lastly there was myself. I had made some money in the diggin's and was escortin' it down the mountains, aiming to send it home express, to my wife. We had shipped our treasure very privately, and thought that nobody suspected there was anything like a great haul in the coach. We knew that Morris was true as steel; and the whole six of us were well armed."

At this moment there is a movement about the door of entrance, and numerous heads are turned in that direction. Strong checks his speech and looks too. A party of five have just arrived, and are slowly making their way toward the

front: Doctor Mitchell, Father Miles, Van Vernet, Philip Dalton, and Charlie Carson. They seem quite unconcerned, quite unconscious that they are objects of scrutiny. Their eyes are fixed upon Dan Strong; and he, after a moment's pause, resumed his story.

"We came down the mountain safely, and were half way through Death Pass, when a shot and a yell warned us of danger. The shot was fired by a robber in ambush, and the yell was the last sound that Billy Morris ever uttered. They seized the horses, and surrounded the coach. We were ordered out, and Jackson—one of the miners who had treasure aboard—was the first to obey. Before they could speak a word, or lay a hand on him, he drew his pistols and began firing. Under cover of his fire, Slack, who was next, got down and began shooting. I followed; and just as I was drawing my pistols, I was seized *from behind*, tripped and thrown to the ground. My head must have struck something, a wheel probably, for I lost my senses. And when I came to, all was quiet. Near me lay Jackson and Slack—both wounded in half a dozen places. On the other side of the trail lay poor Morris, just as he had fallen from the top of the coach, his whip still clutched in his hand. And a little beyond, the horses were standing, one of them tied to a sapling. *The other two passengers were gone.*"

He paused a moment, and looked searchingly down upon the faces before him.

"This is not the first time a stage has been robbed between here and Rockville," he resumes. "But it's the first time a driver has been shot in cold blood. It's the first time men have been left wounded and senseless beside the road, their pockets turned inside out, their last penny gone. I want it

to be the last time. Somewhere between Caledonia and Rockville, these outlaws are in hiding at this moment. And that is not the worst of it. I have been studying their operations, and I am sure of one thing: they have spies in our very midst, here and in Rockville. The two missing passengers are members of this gang. They helped to rifle our pockets, to carry off our gold. This band must be broken up, or we can never transport our dust from above; never feel sure of our lives. How many are there among you who are willing to go out and hunt down these robbers? We don't want an indignation meeting. We want action. You men who are aching to lynch somebody, how many of *you* are ready for honest fighting? Where are the Regulators, that such things can happen so near their headquarters? At sunrise to-morrow I am going to ride to Death Pass, and hunt for a trail that will lead me to these devils in human form. Who goes with me?"

"I," said a voice from the doorway, and Connolley comes forward, pushing his way through the crowd.

"Oh!" said Strong bitterly, "here's the Chief of the Regulators *at last!*"

"Yes," replied Connolley, as he steps upon a bench and from that to the stage, "here I am. I'm with you, Dan." He holds out his hand to Strong, and then turns toward the crowd. His face is haggard, and his eyes look hollow and leaden. "Where are my men?" he says, glancing about him.

From different parts of the room half a dozen men arise and come toward the stage. But before they reach it, Doctor Mitchell, Van Vernet, Philip Dalton, and Charlie Carson have advanced and taken their stand beside Strong and Connolley.

Then the spell seems broken and others press forward,

crowding the stage and talking eagerly. Among them is Podunk, reeling, swaggering, wagging his head defiantly, and declaring his intention to see the thing through. Last, and to the surprise of all, Mack mounts to the stage, and ranges himself beside the volunteers.

As they crowd around the central group, Podunk contrives to get behind Doctor Mitchell and whisper in his ear:

"This won't do. *You must pick your men.*"

CHAPTER XXXV.

CONNOLLEY RECEIVES A "SETTLER."

The next morning, the sun, taking its first peep above the horizon, saw a body of men, twenty-five in number, riding toward the west. They were well mounted and bristling with arms. Strong and Connolley, Dalton and Doctor Mitchell, were at their head. But Van Vernet had chosen to fall back among the men, conversing now with one and then with another, as they rode at an easy gait across the prairie.

The Regulators were there with two exceptions: Cool Hank and the man called Hedley.

That Cool Hank should be absent was not a thing to cause wonder, inasmuch as he had been lost to sight for several days. But Hedley had been one of the six Regulators who had responded to the call of their Captain the night before, and one of the men had heard him say something about going to look after his horse. But when the select cavalcade were mounted and ready, Hedley did not answer to his name.

Three other volunteers were also missing from the ranks: Mack, Podunk and Charlie Carson.

At the last moment, Mack had approached Connolley and presented his excuses. He was indisposed. He was reluctant to leave his "Place." There was no telling what might occur, with all the Regulators gone. Some one, with a little influence or authority, ought to stay behind and keep an eye on things. Besides, he was a poor stick in the saddle; too heavy, and not used to long rides. Connolley might take as many of his men as he chose; *he* would manage "somehow."

"He's as willing as the man who wanted to send all his relatives to the front," said Strong, who had heard Mack's speech. And then he turned on his heel and walked away, his lip curling scornfully.

Charlie Carson had made small excuse. "He found that he could not leave business," he had explained briefly.

But Podunk had deserted without any ceremony of apology. He had seemed to be among those most eager for the fray; a little the worse for liquor, it is true, but as his tipsy condition became more apparent, his courage had seemed to rise. He grew boisterous and full of braggadocio.

"Where's that fellow Podunk?" asked one of the volunteers, who was riding near Vernet.

"Hidin' somewhere, I s'pect," replied another. "Ef there ever was a coward in these diggin's, I bet that feller's one!"

"He felt full enough of fight last night, I sh'd say!"

"Oh, yes; last night! But then he was full o' whisky too. I heard him gassin' Dan Strong, and when Dan accused him of being drunk, what do you s'pose he said?"

"Dunno; what?"

"Wal, he said that his legs might be a trifle drunk but his head was sober."

Vernet smiled as he thought of Stanhope's queer masquerade; and then he rode forward to exchange words with the Doctor.

He knew, and Doctor Mitchell knew, thanks to the good offices of Charlie Carson, that Stanhope had decided not to be of their number.

"He says he can do better work here," Charlie had told them, after delivering Podunk's message. "And he says that this hunt's bound to turn out a fiasco."

Whereupon Doctor Mitchell had delivered himself of his customary "Umph!" and added: "I shouldn't wonder if he was right."

Throughout the morning they advanced at a leisurely gait, for they wished to reach the timber with fresh horses, and it was nearly noon when they arrived at Death Pass, where they halted, lunched, and took counsel together.

There were plentiful traces of the recent struggle. The grass was trampled and blood besprinkled; sundry articles, of little or no value, lay where they had fallen from the hands of the robbers who had rifled the pockets of their victims, taking only valuables and flinging away the rest. Two battered hats lay near the scene of the struggle.

"Them hats belonged to Jackson and Slack," said Strong, taking up one of them and turning it in his hand. "I s'pose they took mine—it was a new one—and Morris's too. I couldn't find either."

There was a difference of opinion as to which route they should follow. There was something like a footpath up the steep incline of the Pass to the right, and there were broken

twigs and other evidences of a scramble through the bushes upon the wall, equally steep and far more rugged, that bounded the Pass to the left. It was impossible to urge the horses up either ascent.

"Better send a few men up each side," suggested Doctor Mitchell to Connolley.

"I'll lead one," said Strong. "Connolley, you—"

"No," broke in Connolley, "send some one else."

"Morgan," suggested the Doctor.

In a few moments, Morgan, or Vernet, followed by three others, was scrambling up the steep wall on the left, while Strong led the way up the opposite bank, their horses being picketed by the side of the Pass.

When they had disappeared behind the thick brush and overhanging trees, Connolley approached Doctor Mitchell, who was standing aloof from the rest, seemingly lost in thought.

"I s'pose you thought it odd that I didn't want to lead one of them parties," said the Regulator in a low tone.

The Doctor turned his keen eyes full upon him.

"I don't know," he said, a shade of coldness in his tone. "You don't appear quite like yourself, Connolley."

"I don't *feel* like myself, and I can't account for it. You don't suppose I'm goin' to be sick now, Doctor?"

The Doctor put on his professional look.

"Umph! I don't know. Your skin is yellow—I'd call it pale if you wasn't so tanned. Your eyes are dull and hollow—how do they feel?"

"They burn; and now and then there's a queer snapping in my head, and I turn blind."

"Umph! stick out your tongue."

Connolley thrust out his tongue and looked sheepish.

"Umph! What did you eat last night?"

"I don't remember; nothin' that I aint used to."

"Where did you eat?"

"At Mack's."

"Oh; And what did you drink?"

"Nothin' but water."

"With your supper?"

"Yes."

"But you took something after supper?"

"Yes; Mack insisted upon my taking a snooze on the lounge in his office, and we had a glass together before I went to sleep."

"You did, eh? At the bar?"

"No; in Mack's office."

"Oh, ho! Out of a private bottle, I suppose? Mack mixed you up a choice drink, didn't he?"

"Well, s'pose he did, what has that to do with it?" impatiently.

"Oh, nothing; *nothing*. You slept soundly, of course?"

"Yes; if I hadn't slipped off the lounge, guess I'd a been asleep yet."

"Umph!" The Doctor turned on his heel and walked a few paces up the Pass.

"I'd like to know what you're driving at," growled the Regulator, following after him. "I thought we was talkin' about what ails me."

"Bah! that's clear enough."

"Then what is it?"

"You've been *drugged*—that's all."

"Drugged?—*me?*"

"Yes, you. You've been drugged, and made a catspaw of.

You needn't worry about your health; you'll be all right enough when the opiate gets out of you. Didn't I warn you against Mack?"

"*Mack!*"

"Yes, *Mack!* *He* gave you a nightcap that kept you out of the way. *He* scattered your Regulators. He didn't want you around when his mob got ready to lynch Dalton."

"*His* mob!"

"Yes, *his*. Connolley, how much longer do you mean to play the fool and let Mack make a tool of you?"

For answer Connolley stared at him blankly a moment, and then turning sharply about, walked up the Pass and seated himself upon a large rock.

"Umph!" grunted the Doctor to himself, "I shouldn't wonder if *that* settled him!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MACK PLAYS A NEW GAME.

A little after sunrise, and while the reinforced Regulators were wending their way across the open prairie toward Death Pass, Charlie Carson ran lightly up the steep stairway of the St. Charles, and hurried down the long narrow hall that ran from the front of the building to the rear.

He carried a key in his hand, and when he had reached the door of the last room at the end of the hall, he paused and looked back. All about him was stillness, the very house

seemed asleep; and a satisfied smile overspread his face as he fitted the key in the lock and opened the door.

Some one was lying upon the narrow bed that filled nearly half of the room. When Charlie had closed the door and locked it on the inside, this personage reared himself on his elbow, and turned upon him an inquiring face.

It was Dick Stanhope, divested of all disguise, and looking as if quite content to be himself again.

"Well!" he ejaculated, seeing that Charlie was staring blankly; "what is it?"

"Whew!" exclaimed Charlie, "but you *are* changed! So this is how you look when you are at home, eh?"

"Pretty much; only sometimes I'm a little better dressed."

"I guess Caledonia can stand your togs. It isn't likely that there'll be any swell parties here, for a few days at any rate. Did you get some sleep?"

"A very good nap, thank you. What's the news out-of-doors?"

Charlie Carson and Podunk had arrived at a very satisfactory understanding, and the latter had not been disappointed in his expectations. He had found in the light-hearted, quick-witted, brisk, young hotel clerk, just the ally he was in need of.

"The town's quiet enough now," Charlie said in answer to his question. "But Mack is up to something new."

Stanhope sat erect upon the side of the bed.

"What is it?" he asked quickly.

"He's applied to me for permission to overhaul Selwyn's baggage."

"Oh!"

"He says that he has had some business with Selwyn, and thinks there should be papers to show how they stand."

"Oh!" again from Stanhope.

"He began on me very gently. I didn't appear much opposed to the scheme, and he grew bolder, and said he wanted his examination to be private."

"Yes, yes! I see."

"I hesitated just enough to encourage him, and he offered me one hundred dollars if I would give him half an hour in Selwyn's room, *alone?*"

"Alone, eh? Charlie, how is it that no one has applied for this privilege before?"

"Well, you see, Doctor Mitchell ordered me to close Selwyn's room, leaving it just as it stood, and Mack heard him. That was before the inquiry. I guess Mack wasn't anxious to have a public search made. Perhaps there was something in Selwyn's possession that he didn't want ventilated."

"Perhaps," echoed Stanhope thoughtfully.

"And I fancied that the Doctor thought it best to ignore the possibility of finding the wrong sort of evidence among Selwyn's belongings."

"Very likely."

Charlie was silent a moment; then: "I wonder, though, that you and your friend did not make an effort to explore the room."

"We meant to do it, all in good time."

"Well, you *are* a cool one! How, may I ask?"

"Oh, I haven't been in the Secret Service ten years without learning how to commit burglary. It wouldn't be much of a trick to pick one of your hotel locks."

Charlie sat down opposite the bed and looked at him

keenly—sturdy young fellow that he was, he admired this cool, high-handed detective exceedingly.

"What answer did you give Mack?" asked Stanhope.

"I told him I'd consider it, and let him know soon. I guess he expects the bribe will fetch me."

"Good; you did well. I think it will be best to explore a little ourselves, in advance of Mack, eh?"

Charlie shook his head and grinned.

"If you're such an expert, you won't need me. As I'm the man in charge here, at present, I'd rather keep out. But I'll give you a clear field, and a friendly warning if you are likely to be interrupted."

"That will do me. Have you hit on any new plan for my public appearance?"

Charlie's face brightened.

"Yes," he said, "and it's a good one; luck has played right into our hands. About an hour ago a wagon train crossed the prairie, headed south-east. They passed within a mile of the city, without stopping."

"Oh!" said Stanhope; "I see."

"It's better than the other scheme. If I introduce you to all Caledonia as a brother, just come through on that wagon train, nobody will be likely to dispute it."

"That's so," said Stanhope thoughtfully. "And now I'm ready for business."

Half an hour later, Stanhope emerged from Selwyn's room, and found Charlie pacing the main hall. Without a word he left his post, and together they went back to the little rear room.

"Well?" spoke Charlie, when they were safely within. "You don't look like a man that's been disappointed."

"I don't feel like one," said Stanhope significantly.

"Now, then, what shall I do about Mack? I guess anything you say will be satisfactory to the Doctor."

"If it isn't, you can wash your hands of the blame and turn it over to me. It will be as well to let Mack take a look; he won't find anything to disturb him now, and it'll make him feel easier."

"Easier! I'd like to make him feel *un*easier."

"That's where you're wrong. The more secure he feels, the less difficult it will be to catch him napping. Let him have his will, by all means; and be sure and accept the bribe."

"No; I don't want to do *that!*"

"You must; it's a part of the programme. You needn't keep it. You can throw it away, or buy masses for his miserable soul with it."

"All right, if you say so."

"I *do* say so; emphatically."

While Stanhope and Charlie were thus arranging their plans, Mack was sitting alone in his office, a frown upon his face, and impatience showing itself in every movement. On a desk at his elbow, pens, ink and paper were arranged as if made ready for instant use. The window shades were lowered so that the view of the street was shut out, but a sufficient amount of light came in at the tops of the two windows that overlooked the street. Presently there was a hesitating knock at the street door, and Mack called out sharply: "Come in."

The door opened slowly, and a young man entered. One glance would suffice to reveal to even a casual observer that he was a young man in years only. Vice and dissipation had hollowed caverns for his black eyes, mottled his skin, fur-

rowed his features. His walk was a shamble, his dress untidy. Evidently he stood in awe of the man before him.

"Oh, you've come at last," growled Mack. There was, in his voice and manner, no trace of the urbanity which he put on as a garment in public, and dropped altogether in private, as if it were a thing likely to become threadbare with constant use. "You've been a good while about it. Shut the door and lock it."

The young man obeyed; but as he turned, there was a look upon his face such as a vicious but weak animal might cast upon its tormentor.

"Sit down there," commanded Mack, pointing to the stool before the desk. "I've got a little job for you."

His visitor sat down, and awaited his next words in sullen silence. Mack looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, and then crossed the room, took from a cupboard a bottle and glass, and deposited them upon the desk.

"Take something, Harry," he said, in a milder tone.

But the other shook his head.

"I don't care for anything. What do you want of me?"

Mack uttered an oath, and snatched up the bottle. "You're getting high toned," he said; "I'd like to know who you think you are?"

"Oh, I know who I am well enough," said the other doggedly; "I'm about what you made me."

"*I* made you?"

"Yes, you! One might as well be a convict as fall into your hands. I wonder how long such fellows as you will run this western country?"

Mack sat down and assumed a look of virtuous indignation.

"I was under the impression," he said, "that you was Harry

Hatch, a little nigger singer who hadn't a cent in his pocket when he landed at my door; a fellow that I befriended, and who repaid me by robbing my money drawer."

"Since you remember so much, perhaps you will remember that you got me here by making fair promises which you never kept; that you paid me just half the salary you agreed to, and got that all back in fines, lay offs, and whiskey bills; that you set me to doing your dirty work; and that when I tried to steal money enough to take me away from this cursed country—not half the sum you had cheated me out of—you caught me at it, and made a great spread about letting me off without punishment; so that you might have me all the more in your power. When I get back to God's country, if ever I do, I'll go in for prison reform, and have all convicts sent to you to be tortured out of half of their lease of life."

"You'd better look out," said Mack frowning blackly, "or you'll never live to get back there."

"Bah!"

Harry Hatch was short and slight, with little hands and feet, and effeminate features. As he sat on the high stool, dangling his legs and looking sullen defiance at his master, he was, for a moment, in actual danger. Mack's brawny fist was clinched and half raised to strike; then, suddenly, it dropped to his side. He turned and resumed his seat.

"Look here, Harry," he said, choking down his wrath, "I'll do the fair thing by you. I want a bit of writing done. Do it, and I'll pay your fare back home."

But Hatch shook his head.

"No, sir," he said. "I came out here at your expense, labeled like a bale of goods. I'll go back, when I do go, like a man."

"Will you go back at once, if I let you have the money?"

"I'm not so much in love with this place that I'll be likely to stay long, when I'm able to leave it."

"Well, I'll give you money to pay your way, and something over. Now for the writing; time's precious." He took two letters from his pocket and handed one of them to Hatch. "Can you imitate that writing?" he asked.

Hatch took the letter, evidently not in the least surprised. It was a brief epistle; and when his eyes fell upon the first words he started and seemed about to say something. But a second thought controlled him, and he scanned the written words silently.

"Yes," he said, when he had finished his inspection; "that's easy enough."

"Well, then, go to work. I want this"—taking a folded paper from his pocket—"copied in that handwriting. Here's the envelope; make the name at the top precisely like that."

Hatch took the envelope and looked at it. It was stamped and bore the New York postmark. Evidently it had been through the mails, and it was addressed to Duke Selwyn.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A SHEET OF PAPER.

Neither Stanhope or Charlie Carson were the men to loiter when once they had decided upon a course of action. And their decision being reached, they set out at once for Mack's.

"I may as well go along," Stanhope had said. "It will

seem quite natural that I should wish to take an early peep at such an institution as Mack's, and I want to get used to myself in 'store clothes'."

"All right," said Charlie cheerfully. "As you're my brother, of course your name must be Carson, but what shall I put before it?"

"Oh, you may call me Dick. It'll do as well as any; besides its my genuine front name anyhow, and I'm rather used to it."

They found the saloon deserted, except for the barkeeper drowzing behind the counter, and, after a peep into the empty auditorium, they went out, Charlie taking the lead, and his counterfeit brother following, and looking about him like an interested stranger.

"I shouldn't wonder if we found him in his office," said Charlie, and thither they went.

As they were about to knock at the office door, it opened suddenly, and Harry Hatch came out. There was a frown upon his face, and Stanhope's quick eye noted that the fingers of the hand that rested upon the latch were ink stained.

He saw, too, over Hatch's shoulder, a scowl upon the face of Mack, who was just behind.

"Howdy, Harry," said Charlie, who, among his other merits, counted that of knowing everybody in Caledonia.

Hatch nodded, but the frown did not relax, and he went his way. Charlie and his companion entered the office.

As Mack held the door wide open to admit them, he stood several paces from the desk, with his two visitors between it and himself. They halted near the entrance, and Charlie hastened to introduce his brother.

"Dick's been doing a little good work up north," Charlie

explained, "and he's going to stop with me awhile. I've agreed to help him get rid of some of his dust."

The frown upon Mack's face disappeared; he scrutinized the new comer with bland interest, and begged them to be seated.

Charlie accepted the proffered chair, but his brother, who struck Mack as being a very cool, "off-hand," young fellow, lounged carelessly back against the open desk, without so much as looking at the chair placed for him.

They conversed a few moments upon the usual topics—the town, the weather, the mining prospects up the mountains, the respective merits of Caledonia and Rockville; and Stanhope was called upon to relate some of his experiences "up north," and with the wagon train—which he did in a very satisfactory manner. Finally Charlie said:

"By the by, Mack, that little matter you spoke of: I guess it will be all right. You can come up, say, in an hour from now."

Mack's countenance brightened, "I'm much obliged to you, Charlie," he said, "till you're better paid." And then he glanced quickly and inquiringly toward Stanhope, who seemed to be deep in contemplation of a row of photographed "stage beauties" tacked against the opposite wall.

Charlie interpreted the glance, and shook his head as if to say, "He is not in the secret." Then: "I guess we'll be going," he remarked aloud.

"Hold on," cried Mack, "you must have a drop of something first."

He went to the cupboard in the rear of the room, and took down a bottle—not that which he had proffered to Harry Hatch, but a smaller one, containing liquor of a better quality.

While he was at the cupboard, his back was toward them for just an instant.

But in that instant Stanhope had turned his head, glanced over the desk to be sure he was right, and quickly transferred a sheet of paper to the loose side pocket of his coat.

When Mack came forward with his bottle and glasses, Stanhope stood as at first, hands in pockets.

"Well," said Charlie, when they were walking back to the hotel, "that was pretty slick. I reckon you must have practiced sleight of hand."

"Oh, that was no trick," replied Stanhope. I suppose you wonder why I took that paper?"

"Well, rather."

"I'll tell you. It was because I happened to see, as I stood by the desk while you were shaking hands with Mack, a name on that paper which was half hidden under those fresh sheets. The name was *Dalton*."

"Oh," ejaculated Charlie.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"AN EVENING AT MACK'S."

The band of assorted musicians attached to Mack's Theatre had finished its last "number," and was filing in from the street to resolve itself into an orchestra five minutes later, when Aileen Lorne entered the dressing room which she shared with four or five others, dropping her mantle from her shoulders as she came. It was not usual for her to be late, but to-night

she looked very wan, her step was slow, and her voice languid.

"Am I late?" she asked, going to her place next to Stella Aubrey. "Yes; I see that I am." She tossed aside her mantle and hurriedly began her toilet.

"If it was any one of us, you'd see a fine chalked up *too* quick," quoth La Belle Florine, as she dabbed at her sallow face with a powder puff.

Aileen seemed not to have heard this remark; Stella Aubrey was the only one among Mack's ladies with whom she tried to be on friendly terms. Stella, with her care-worn face, her quiet manners, and total lack of curiosity, had at once attracted Aileen. As for the others, she shuddered at their vulgarity, and held herself aloof from them.

"I wish I were not first on the programme to-night," she said, as she fastened a sparkling ornament among the coils of her abundant hair. "I'd give something to sit here all by myself for half an hour."

"You'd be very likely to sit here all by yourself if Mack happened to miss you," said Florine gratuitously.

Again Aileen made no answer; seemed not to have heard. Stella turned and looked at her inquiringly.

"Why," she said quickly, "you're sick, Aileen! You're not fit to go on."

"Not sick, Stella; only tired. Perhaps it's the weather. Stella," lowering her tone and leaning toward her friend, "I want to ask a great favor of you."

"What is it?"

"I want to beg a little, a very little rouge," laughing lightly.

Stella Aubrey laughed too, and sent the small saucer of pink sliding across the shelf toward her.

"Well," she said, "that *is* a come-down for you. But you need it; you're ghastly."

"Yes; I know it."

"I wonder if his majesty, Mack, intends to discharge any of us," hazarded Kit Duncan.

"I s'pose he will if you make a hit to-night, St. Leger."

Aileen turned quickly, and saw that Miss Rosabella St. Leger was occupying the third place at the shelf behind her, where Kit Duncan and Florine also stood.

Stella noted the direction of her gaze and smiled.

"Yes," she whispered, as if in answer to a question, "she's managed it; she's thirsting for glory. Look at those curl papers! And she's got her wardrobe all on her back."

Aileen's eyes, at sight of the girl, had flashed a look of contempt; but as she glanced again, she smiled in spite of herself.

Miss Saint Leger was dressed in a very short skirt, of some thick, white stuff, and over it she wore a garment of sea-green tarletan, so voluminous that it gave her the appearance of a circus rider in the midst of a flying leap. Her arms, bare to the shoulder, were brown to the elbow; and the hands, large and bony, were browner still. She was "picking out" her yellow curls until they stood out like a halo; and the rouge and powder, which she had distributed over her face with a free hand, had transformed it into a striking work of art.

It was evident that Kitty and Florine were bursting with merriment, and enjoying the prospect of Miss Saint Leger's coming confusion.

As for Miss Saint Leger, she was more than satisfied with herself and her surroundings. She had heard, back in New York, while washing dishes and "waiting" at hotel tables,

of the easy success won by ambitious young women in the theatres of the West. And she flattered herself that the *coup de etat*, by which she had accomplished her purpose of sooner or later "coming out" on the Western stage, had been a brilliant stroke. As the paid companion of Barbara Wray, she had felt herself, or her position, a little below the salt of the earth. But *now*, as Miss Rosabella Saint Leger, beaming with gratified vanity, throbbing with ambition, blushing with rouge, bristling with tarletan and yellow frizzles—she was the peer of anybody, equipped to slay her thousands, advertised upon Mack's posters as

The Accomplished Young Vocalist!
A NEW STAR!!

"It's too bad!" whispered Aileen, as she turned from her contemplation of Miss Saint Leger. "She will be hissed off the stage."

"Of course she will," assented Stella, going calmly on with her toilet. "Let her: she don't deserve anything better."

"Perhaps she'll allow us to tone her down a bit," suggested Aileen. "I'm going to try; we might improve her a little."

But Aileen's good intentions were broken in upon by the Stage Manager's voice at the door.

"Now then, young ladies, what's the matter? All ready, Miss Lorne, for the first turn?"

"All right, William!" cried Florine, making a speaking trumpet of her hands and calling through it. Then with a grimmace for the benefit of Miss Duncan: "Will always does come up cranky after a spree."

When Aileen had gone down to the stage there was quiet for a moment in the dressing room. Then Kit Duncan broke out:

"There needn't any one tell *me* that Aileen Lorne didn't care a fig for Duke Selwyn! *I* know better."

"Pshaw! Kit," said Stella; "you never had a good word for Aileen. I've come to the conclusion that you're jealous."

"Jealous!" Kit wheeled about with a powder puff held flat against the tip of her nose. "I'd like to be told what of. She can't sing—"

"Oh, yes, she can. All the men in the band say she's the only one here who knows anything about music."

"Well," said Kitty, —she figured on the bills as the "champion lady song and dance artist,—" it's all she *does* know; she can't dance a step, and as for grace—"

"She don't need to," said Aileen's defender. "And as for grace, if you could just step on and off the stage as gracefully as she does, you'd draw a better salary and get more *encores*."

"Well," sniffed Kitty, "she'll get her salary cut down if she keeps on growing white and peaked. Mack ain't soft on sick folks—*you* know that, Aubrey. And I just want you to mark my word: Aileen Lorne is badly cut up about Selwyn."

"I don't believe it."

"Oh, well, *don't*, then. Maybe you would, though, if you knew what *I* know. Come on, girls; I wouldn't miss Saint Leger's turn for money."

If Aileen Lorne—to fulfil the prophecy of "the Champion," as Kit Duncan was derisively called by the habitues of Mack's —was doomed to lose her beauty and her prestige together, there were no signs of a falling off that night, as she stood be-

hind the footlights, a fairy, all in white and gold, and sent her sweet soprano notes ringing down the long hall. And certainly no stage star ever underwent a closer, more persistent scrutiny than she, from one individual at least in that audience.

This person was a young man, with big, keen, brown eyes, a smooth-shaven, handsome face, and an air which was a delightful mixture of good humor and independence. He sat very near the front, at a little table, and Charlie Carson, whom she knew, sat beside him. Two other men were also seated at this table, but Aileen scarcely saw them.

Before she had finished her first ballad, Aileen felt the scrutiny of the clear, brown orbs. And once, when compelled by some irresistible impulse, she let her eyes meet his in a long, slow gaze, she found herself reluctant to look away. And while she did not permit her eyes to turn toward him again, she felt, every instant, that his own were searching her face.

"Did you see that young man who sat in front with Mr. Carson of the St. Charles, Stella?" asked Aileen, when, a few moment's later, the two met in the balcony which Mack insisted upon calling a "parlor," and where he welcomed and entertained his favored and most profitable guests.

Stella nodded. "Yes; good looking, isn't he?"

"I—I don't know. Who is he?"

"*I* never saw him before"—advancing to the balcony's edge and leaning over the rail to look below. "Why, he's gone already." Then seeing the Stage Manager coming: "Oh, here's His Majesty; I'll ask him. Will!"

The Stage Manager halted beside them.

"Well!" he jerked out.

And Stella at once gave up her intention and asked instead: "Haven't you lost something?"

He clapped his hand to his handkerchief pocket, and then looked down at his shirt front, where a huge mock diamond blazed.

"No; why?"

"Oh, nothing. I thought you might be looking after your temper."

"Temper!" he almost shouted, "have you seen that—that—that green horror who's all ready to go on and sing: 'That young man across the way'!"

"Well, I should say we had. If you aren't satisfied with *her*, Will Gibbs, you *are* hard to suit. Is she going on now? Come, Aileen; it'll be too good to miss."

They drew chairs close to the balcony rail, and settled themselves to listen, while Gibbs rushed below in a perspiration.

Just as the bell tinkled, and the curtain went up for Miss Saint Leger's *debut*, Stella, whose face was turned for a moment toward the door of the entrance from the balcony proper, whispered to Aileen:

"We're in a fair way of finding out who *he* is. He's just come in with Mack."

"Hush!" said Aileen; "don't seem to see them."

But Mack at that moment was intent upon other thoughts. When a new face appeared behind his footlights, his audience contained no enthusiast more interested than himself; and a success scored by the *debutante* was to him a source of happiness—and of profit.

But the curtain is up. The orchestra screeches out the initial notes of a prelude, and Miss Rosabella Saint Leger is making her first, her last, her only appearance upon the stage. She is by no means abashed. She comes forward with a minc-

"She's got a hole in her stockin'."—Page 349.

ing gait, and a self-conscious simper. She bows to right, to left, to the front. Then the song begins:

"Oh, I wonder what's his meaning,"

She is a whole note out of tune, and the stage manager groans behind the wing. The orchestra falters, stops, and the leader sounds the key note. Miss Saint Leger catches it and continues:

"Always look-ing over here,"

False note again. The leader wears a desperate expression, but fiddles straight on. Miss Saint Leger looks beamingly unconscious and sings on complacently, and hopelessly out of tune:

"When I'm at the parlor window,
He is certain to appear."

She finishes the verse, singer and orchestra growing momentarily wider apart.

The audience is delighted. They clap their hands, and pound the floor with their heavy heels. They fling out facetious remarks.

Miss Saint Leger beams and bows anew.

This is too much. Charlie Carson and his "brother" laugh in the very face of the Master of Ceremonies. Mack's brow is ominous. He springs up, rushes across the balcony, through the dressing-rooms, down to the stage.

The orchestra has sawed its way through a long interlude; the crowd still fling out their gratuitous and very audible remarks. As Mack reaches the wing, where the Stage Manager stands agonizing, the interlude dies down preparatory to striking once more, loud and strong, the key note for the

next verse. And then the voice of a half-drunken loafer in the centre of the hall is heard above, below, everywhere:

"She's got a hole in her stockin'!"

Miss Saint Leger starts perceptibly, and then deliberately bends sidewise and looks down at her slippered feet.

It is the last straw; the house rings with shouts and derisive laughter. And Mack, with a prefatory curse, shouts too, in the Stage Manager's ear:

"——! ——! ——! ring down that curtain ——! ——! ——!"

It is over in a moment. The curtain has fallen; and Miss Rosabella Saint Leger is ruefully climbing the steep, narrow stairs, a retired *prima donna* in green tarletan and tears.

During the interval that elapsed between the going down of the curtain upon the ruin of all the earthly hopes of Miss Susan Collins, and its rising again for the appearance of "the Champion", Stanhope, or Dick Carson, as he now called himself, leaned over the balcony rail and scanned the audience below with keen eyes.

"Look," he said, in a low tone to Charlie, "isn't that the little chap we met coming out of Mack's office this afternoon?"

"Yes," said Charlie, glancing down; "Harry Hatch, he calls himself."

"Tell me what you know about him."

"Why, he's one of those always-broke Nigger singers. Mack got him here as he gets half his people—advances their fare and takes care that they never get money enough to pay it back and skip the town. He's a schemer, is Mack."

"He doesn't belong to Mack's force now, does he?"

"Hatch? No, I think not. Harry's a hard drinker, and of no use to anybody when he's drunk. Some of these fellows

are funnier on the stage drunk than sober, but Hatch ain't of that sort. I reckon Mack's shipped him."

"What was he doing at Mack's, do you think, if he has no salary to draw?"

"Oh, I don't know—trying to borrow a dollar, maybe. I'll wager he didn't get it; he looked mighty glum."

"Yes; I saw that. And I saw that Mack looked glum, too. Is Hatch a fair scholar?"

"Why, I think it likely; his address is good. He applied to my boss for a place as night clerk, a while ago, and I remember he represented himself as a good and rapid penman."

"When is your boss coming back?" asked Stanhope, withdrawing his gaze from the face of Harry Hatch, and seeming to lose all interest in him.

"Why he's likely to return any day, and to go away the day after. He's stuck on that cattle ranch of his."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, suppose, for instance, he had been here and Mack had asked him, as he did you, to let him overhaul Selwyn's belongings—what would he have done?"

"Satisfied himself that no one would be the wiser for it, and then told Mack to go ahead."

"That's enough," said Stanhope.

As the entertainment was nearing its close, Kitty Duncan came bouncing into the dressing-room where Stella Aubrey was preparing for her part in a "roaring farce," and snapped her fingers in triumph very close to Stella's nose.

"I guess I'll 'take the cake' to-night," she said eagerly. "That good-looking brother of Charlie Carson's has asked me to supper. Aileen Lorne don't get *all* the big fish."

"Aileen don't angle for them. But don't crow; Aileen refused point blank to be introduced to your good-looking Mr. Carson an hour or more ago. I heard her."

"Bah!" cried Kitty, tugging viciously at her wig, which was very much awry; "I *detest* that girl!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

VERNET TAKES COMMAND.

The noon halt in Death Pass resulted in little that could serve to guide the further movements of the robber hunters. The exploring parties to the right and left returned, each disappointed, each having discovered something, but not enough.

To the left, at a convenient distance from the Pass, were evidences that a number of horses had been tethered there quite recently. That they had remained for some little time was proved by the browsed and leafless twigs and branches as high overhead as a horse could reach, and by the close cropped grass, and barked and broken shrubbery, underneath.

On the other hand, at the right, something like a faint trail led up, zigzaging in and out among the thick underbrush. This trail the exploring party followed until it terminated suddenly at the edge of a narrow ravine, the sides of which were almost perpendicular.

"'Taint worth while to beat about here," said Dan Strong confidently. "We can find plenty o' tracks; but if we want to find *robbers*, we've got to go further up the mountains."

Connolley, Doctor Mitchell, Vernet and Dalton were of the same opinion; and the onward march began.

All that long afternoon they pressed forward; riding hither and thither, following the faintest trail that promised to turn out anything more than the track of some wild or stray animal, deploying to the right and left of the stage road, separating and coming together again to begin anew. It was nearing sunset when they halted for consultation at the top of a steep bluff, where the road was narrow, and the wood on either side dense and tangled with underbrush.

"I've always believed," said Connolley, "that this bit of table-land could tell its story. It's here they used to halt the stages, before they got so tarnation bold. I suspect there's a hidin' place somewhere in this neighborhood, if we could only stumble onto it. I move we do a little explorin' right here."

"But," objected the Regulator known as Pete Finlayson, "you don't reckon on *campin'* here, do you, Connolley? 'Twould be a ticklish place ter be surprised in."

"We ain't goin' to be surprised, no matter where we halt; we're goin' to swap watches. An' this is as good a place as any, far as I see. There's one thing sure: Our horses'll be tolerably safe here; no critter can git through this underbrush."

"That's so," said Strong. "I'm of your opinion, Connolley; we ought to do a little bush-beatin' right here."

They had all gathered together, urging their horses close upon one another in the narrow road, and now Finlayson, who was very near Vernet, spoke sharply:

"D'ye want us to leave our horses and take to the bush, Captain?"

"Yes," replied Connolley shortly; "all but two or three."

He swept the little band with a keen glance and then said: "I'll tell off three men to stay with the horses, and then we'll break into parties—eh, Doctor?"

Doctor Mitchell nodded.

"About three in each party would be right," said Strong.

The party dismounted, and looked to their weapons. And then Connolley and Doctor Mitchell told off their men. Perfect silence was enjoined upon all after they were once fairly within the bush, and a signal was agreed upon in case of a discovery or a surprise.

When Van Vernet dismounted, one of the men detailed to do picket duty came forward, and reached out to take his bridle. As he did so, Vernet's eye rested for an instant upon the outstretched hand.

"Why, man!" he exclaimed, "what's the matter with your hand?"

"Warts," said the fellow; and turned away, leading the horse.

Strong and two stout followers were the first to plunge into the woods on the right. Doctor Mitchell, with two Regulators, took to the left. When each man was appointed his place, Van Vernet found himself tramping through the underbrush with Finlayson going before him, and a stout Regulator, whose name he did not know, bringing up the rear; and he was glad to see that Dalton was one of the two men who followed the lead of Connolley.

For some time Finlayson pressed ahead in a straight line, and Van Vernet, who had reduced himself to the ranks and took no share in the consultation, followed unhesitatingly close at his heels. When they had traveled thus a considerable distance, Finlayson halted and whispered cautiously:

"Maybe we'd better spread out just a little; keep each other in sight or hearin' but try to widen our beat—eh?"

Vernet nodded assent; and the three moved a little way apart—Finlayson to the left, and the Regulator to the right, with Vernet midway between them, and all three with their faces still westward.

They had pushed on a considerable distance in this manner, and Vernet was peering through the dense foliage directly in front of him, when suddenly the stillness about them was broken by a clear, high, double note, the hoot of a species of small owl sometimes seen and heard in that region. It sounded upon his left, and very near. Vernet turned sharply, and met the inquiring gaze of Finlayson, which was instantly withdrawn and directed upward, as if he were looking among the interlacing branches for that feathered disturber of the silence.

For just an instant Vernet, too, glanced upward; and then his gaze returned and rested keenly upon Finlayson, who was walking slowly about with his head thrown back and his eyes upraised.

At the very moment when his back was squarely toward Vernet, another hoot was heard, close at hand, loud and clear, like the first. A look of anger crossed the face of the detective, and he began to move toward Finlayson, who seemed to be listening intently. Vernet, now close behind him, stopped and listened too.

How silent everything was! The sun was already far below the tree tops; all about them the greenness was changing to black, and beginning to assume fantastic shapes.

Then, faintly, and a great way off, was heard an answering note—once, twice, three times repeated.

Vernet's hand came heavily down upon Finlayson's shoulder. "What was that?" he demanded, in a low tone.

The man started and turned quickly.

"That's jest what *I* was tryin' to make out," he said. "It sounded like one o' those pesky little black owls."

"A *black* owl?"

"Well, they *look* black. He must be mighty nigh us." And Finslayson began to look aloft again.

"I thought," said Vernet slowly, and looking around at the other Regulator, who was now moving toward them, "that it was a signal."

"Pshaw!" said Finlayson hastily, "*we* didn't agree on no such signal."

"No, we didn't; but the men we are looking for might have done so."

Finlayson shook his head.

"I don't believe anybody could imitate a bird like that," he said.

"Don't you?" smiled Vernet. "Well, now, just to convince you—." He turned away his head, very much as Finlayson had done a moment before, and a gave a loud, clear call, precisely like the first they had heard; then another, and another, and another in quick succession, turning, with the last, to look at Finlayson, who was reddening duskily, and looked actually terrified.

"Stop!" he said; "stop, for the Lord's sake!"

For answer, Vernet gave another long shrill hoot, that went echoing up the mountain beyond them.

"What's this?" asked the Regulator who had now come up. "What in the nation—." Then he, too, started, and stopped and listened.

"Tu whoo! tu whoo! tu whoo!" sounded from the opposite side of the Pass. The woods were echoing with the loud, clear calls.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the Regulator, "that ain't *our* signal!"

"No," said Finlayson, turning and facing toward the coach road, "but we may as well go back."

"Why?" said Vernet.

"Because,"—with a sullen glance and a muttered oath—" "the Lord only knows what that racket's all about. *I* don't want to run into no ambush."

'Oh, I thought you were *sure* it was a black owl!"

Finlayson made a step forward. "I'm going back," he said doggedly.

Vernet shot the Regulator at his side a meaning glance.

"Very good," he said, "go back; we'll follow you."

Then, before either could stir or speak again, another unexpected sound rang through the forest—the sharp crack of a rifle, followed instantly by a second report. And these, too, came from the opposite side of the coach road.

Vernet could see, through the gathering dusk, that Finlayson was now very pale, and evidently puzzled.

"What kind of a bird was *that*, do you think?" he asked satirically.

Finlayson's only reply was a muttered oath, and a backward movement.

"Hist!" exclaimed the Regulator.

One, two, three short, sharp whistles, loud and piercing, followed the rifle shots.

"*That's* the signal," said the Regulator. And he began tramping sturdily back toward the east, Vernet and Finlayson following.

As the Regulator pressed forward, Vernet perceived that Finlayson lagged behind. He made his observations by casting quick, sidewise glances, and when Finlayson had fallen so far in the rear that he could no longer see him without turning his head squarely, he quietly transferred his gun from his right hand to the left, and drew a pistol.

A few steps more, and the regulator emerged into an open space. Vernet stepped quickly after him and suddenly turned.

Finlayson, his back toward them, was in the act of parting some bushes, with the evident purpose of concealing himself behind them.

"Finlayson!" called Vernet sharply.

Finlayson turned his head, saw that Vernet had him covered by the pistol, and swung his whole body around.

"I thought I heard something in there," he stammered.

"Finlayson," said Vernet calmly, "I want you to walk on ahead of me, until we arrive at the *rendezvous*."

"I won't," said Finlayson stoutly.

"Click!" said the pistol in Vernet's hand.

"Yes, you will, or I'll put a bullet through you. You won't lead those men to an ambush with *my* consent. Go ahead."

Finlayson looked from the pistol to the face behind it, growled out another oath, and, passing Vernet, marched sullenly forward at the side of the astonished Regulator.

CHAPTER XL.

A "BLACK OWL."

Connolley, Dalton and the Regulator who completed their trio, waited in the opening or roadway until they had seen the last of the two exploring parties disappear in the thick wood. Then they too entered it, going eastward.

On this route the trees were less thickly crowded together, and the underbrush seemed not so rank.

They had traveled some distance, and were beginning to find their silent march monotonous, when they came upon an opening among the trees larger than any they had as yet found, and, evidently, not altogether the work of nature. Some of the overhanging branches had been lopped off, the low-growing bushes had been cut away or uprooted, and in the center of the small circular space thus made were the scattered remains of a camp-fire.

"Oh!" said Connolley, as his quick eye fell upon this, "anyhow, they've *been* here."

He went forward, knelt beside the dead embers and began turning them over, thrusting his hands deep down among the ashes and sifting them through his fingers. Finally he arose and stood beside his waiting companions.

"It's fully two days old," he said, in a tone of disappointment. Then, as he looked about him. "We'd better explore a little, in a circle like. You"—nodding to the Regulator—

"go in there," pointing to the right. "You Mr. Dalton, if you will—."

"Certainly," said Daltion quickly. "Which way, Mr. Connolley?"

"Well, if you like, go in there," pointing to his left. "I'll go in here," moving forward a pace. "Each one go about two rods straight ahead, then begin to circle to the right. It'll keep us within easy hailin' distance."

Dalton and the Regulator nodded, and in another moment the clearing about the deserted camp ground was again in solitude.

It was while they were thus circling, each in his place, that the first "tu whoo" of the black owl broke the stillness of the forest. Connolley, with his sturdy feet planted in the midst of a clump of tall bushes, and his hand raised to clear for himself a passage through, paused in the act, to listen. The branches about him stood up high above his head, except for the small space where his hand held one of them down. Beyond was another of the frequent openings, but the bushes on its farther side would not have stood much above his shoulder, and he saw, with a thrill of expectation, that their leaves seemed violently agitated.

Cautiously he drew back a little, so that he could handle his rifle and take aim, if need be, through his port-hole, which he now kept clear with the barrel of the gun. And then, to his surprise, he saw the bushes before him separated by the broad shoulders of a man. The man's back was toward Connolley; he was bending low and seemed intent upon some object directly ahead. Connolley bowed down until he could look across the man's shoulder, and he caught his breath as he saw him raise his gun and take aim.

Then Connolley bit his lip, and aimed his own weapon.

Crack! rang out the rifle in the hands of the man before him; and crack! again, almost simultaneously, rang out the rifle in the hands of Connolley. Then there was a groan from the first man, and a forward spring from the other.

"Oh, it's you!" exclaimed Connolley, to the man who tumbled out from the clump of bushes, and over upon the ground at his feet. But he did not stop; he stepped across the fallen fellow and hurried on to where, some yards away, he had seen a man's head a moment before. As he bounded forward, the air became vocal with the second series of tu whoos.

When he had reached the spot, he found Philip Dalton, leaning against a tree and thoughtfully contemplating his hat, which he held in one hand.

"Are you hurt, Dalton?" gasped the Captain of the Regulators.

"No," said Dalton coolly: "not *quite*. But I should hate myself if I had come *that* near a man without hitting him."

He held out the hat, which had a hole in the front and rear and Connolley glanced from this to his forehead, where drops of blood were slowly trickling down, and from which a tuft of hair was missing.

"He didn't miss you by a quarter of an inch!" cried Connolley wrathfully. "But I nipped *him*. He won't try that again. Come."

Dalton replaced his hat upon his head, picked up his gun, and followed Connolley back to the place where his would-be assassin lay groaning.

"He's only shot through the hand," said Connolley; "I didn't aim to kill the scamp."

"Crack!" again, almost simultaneously, rang out the rifle of Connelley.—Page 360.

Dalton bent down and looked at the wounded hand, and then started back, uttering a quick exclamation.

"What's the matter?" asked Connolley. Then, without waiting for a reply: "Say, did you hear them hoots? By heavens! how many there was! Something's wrong!" He placed his fingers to his lips and blew three loud calls. "Something's wrong," he said again; "we'll go back." Then he bent over the prostrate man. "Hold your tongue; you'll live. Stick out your hand till I tie something around it. There; now drink from this flask. Get up; you can lean on me. Confound you, what did you shoot at Dalton for?"

"I didn't," groaned the fellow. "I thought it was a robber."

"Likely story, that!"

"I *did*. I saw just his hat, and it's getting so dark."

"*I* saw just his hat," growled Connolley, "and I knew it was Dalton's. There aint another like it in the country. Stop your lies."

"Let up on him, Connolley," said Dalton with careless contempt. "I'll keep a lookout for him in future. Perhaps it *was* a mistake."

"Umph! And perhaps it *wasn't!*"

"Why," said Dalton, turning to look at the Regulator, "what's come over you, Connolley? I didn't think it was in you to be so suspicious."

"Well, it *is*," retorted Connolley, "and it's in me to stay!"

Doctor Mitchell and his two companions were the first to arrive at the place where the horses had been picketed. Only two of the three men who had been left on guard were visible

"Why, where's the other fellow?" demanded the Doctor, addressing the nearest picket.

"Hicks? Oh, not far off. He's over there among them trees."

Doctor Mitchell walked quickly to the place indicated.

"Hello!" he muttered, as he saw more clearly the object supposed to be Hicks; "a coat!"

He pulled it off the branch from which it had been suspended, and carried it back to the picket.

"Do you call this Hicks?" he asked.

"By Jingo!" cried the astonished fellow, "it's his coat!"

"Well, you perceive that he isn't in it, don't you."

"I should say! What's to be done?"

At this moment, another of the exploring parties emerged from the woods on the right, and then another. And each man forgot to wonder why they had been recalled, and the question became, instead, "What has become of Hicks?"

In the midst of their discussion, Hicks himself appeared before them, supported by Connolley, upon whom he leaned heavily, and followed by Dalton and the Regulator who completed their party, and who carried three guns across his shoulder.

Hicks was pale, weak, terrified; one hand, wrapped in a bloody handkerchief, dangled loosely at his side, and his garments were liberally smeared with blood. Connolley wa gloomy and uncommunicative. He wore the look that some of the Regulators knew well, and in all that he did and said there was evident a disposition not to be trifled with.

On their way he had spoken to Hicks a word of warning and admonition; and now he vouchsafed to the wondering men scant explanation.

"Hicks has had an accident," was all he said. "Here, some of you, see what you can do for him."

Doctor Mitchell took prompt charge of the fellow, and dressed the wounded hand. While this work was in progress, Finlayson made his appearance in the edge of the wood, and just behind him came Van Vernet, smiling slightly, and with his hand upon his pistol belt.

"What did you find?" asked Connolley.

"Nothing," said Vernet laconically.

Dan Strong and his two companions were the last to appear.

"What's the matter?" he asked, looking sharply around.

"Hicks has met with an accident; that's all," said Connolley; and then the eyes of the two men met.

"Oh!" said Strong, turning away.

"We'll camp right here," said Connolley. "It's as good a place as any."

He went about his share of the work in grim silence. He was very exact about all his arrangements, and his division of the men was not quite what some of them expected. Vernet, whose eyes were Everywhere saw that he whispered aside with the stout Regulator who had been the companion of himself and Finlayson; and that the Regulator soon after stationed himself beside the wounded man, Hicks, with a very alert look. He saw Connolley also in communication with two others of the Regulators, who soon after placed themselves on either side of Finlayson; not ostentatiously, yet with evident purpose.

"I'm going to take half of the watch," Connolley said, standing among a group of men. "Strong, will you take the other half?"

"Yes; an' be glad," answered Strong. And then he said

aside to Doctor Mitchell: "I aint very anxious to sleep to-night."

At an early hour, all was quiet in the encampment, and the men, save those on guard, were lying grouped about two or three smouldering camp fires.

Vernet, rolled in his blanket, with his head pillowed upon a saddle, was musing, very wide awake, and conveniently near the man Finlayson, when he felt a hand upon his shoulder, and a voice whispered in his ear:

"Hist; it's Connolley. Get up and come with me."

A little way from the encampment, in one of the small openings through which he had lately passed, the Regulator Captain had built a fire; and Vernet found Doctor Mitchell and Dalton seated beside it cross-legged, and looking, in the flickering firelight, not unlike two plotting Indians.

"Here we are," said Connolley, dropping down beside the fire, while Vernet silently placed himself at Dalton's side.

"Well," said the Doctor, with a touch of impatience in his tone, "what are we here for, Connolley?"

"Gentlemen," said Connolley, "we may as well turn tail an' go back to Caledonia, to-morrow morning, bright an' early."

"Why?" asked Vernet.

"Because, we've got traitors amongst us—*amongst the Regulators.*"

"Oh!" said the Doctor; "have you found that out at last?"

"Yes; I've found it out at last, and you needn't be afraid that I'll forget it. The worst is, I don't know now many there are. But I've nailed *one.*"

"Who?" asked the Doctor.

"Hicks. He tried to shoot Dalton, here."

"And shot himself instead?" asked Vernet.

"No; I shot him." And Connolley related the incident as it had occurred. "He tried to lie out of it," he said in conclusion, "by claiming that he didn't know it was Dalton, as he only saw the hat. If he saw that, he must have known it was Dalton's!"

"There's no doubt but his bullet was meant for me," said Dalton quietly. "He's tried it before, or I'm much mistaken."

"What! tried to shoot you?"

"No; but I think he is the fellow who played the spy at Doctor Mitchell's, and drew a knife on me."

"That isn't all," said Vernet significantly. "But we need not discuss the rest now. Connolley, have you ever suspected Finlayson?"

"Not till to-night."

"And why to-night?"

"Well," said Connolley slowly, "for no reason only that I know he's Mack's right-hand man. There's been a good many things that I couldn't account for as long as I had faith in Mack. *Now* I can see just how we've been handled. I've been pretty blind but—I might as well tell ye—it all come over me in a flash when the Doctor there told me that I had been drugged last night."

"Umph!" from the Doctor.

"Now, if Mack's a traitor, and there's traitors among my men, why it's fair to conclude that Finlayson's one, an' that Hedley's with him."

"Did you hear that owl?" asked Vernet abruptly.

"Did I! Didn't everybody? If you could a seen us! It was them hoots that petrified us all like. There was me standin' in one clump of bushes, Hicks in another right afore me, and

Dalton among the trees a little way ahead, an' all three in a direct line. Every one of us stopped stock still when we heard the first hoot; and when we'd heard, or thought we had, the last one, Hicks had the best chance in the world to draw a bead on Dalton, and I had the same chance to cripple *him*. But he got a second ahead of me; I meant to hit his hand afore it pulled the trigger."

"What made you fire?" asked the Doctor. "Why didn't you order him to drop his gun?"

"I'll tell ye," said Connolley quietly. "I was mad. I felt sure he knew it was Dalton, and that he was one of the traitors. I *wanted* to hurt him."

"Well, you did it," said the Doctor. "I shouldn't wonder if he lost that hand, warts and all."

There was silence for a moment around the flickering fire, then Doctor Mitchell, who seemed to be in a discontented frame of mind, jerked out a question:

"I'd like to know what you mean to do, Connolley?"

"Go back," answered Connolley, in a tone that indicated a desire to meet his discontent half way.

"But the men won't stand it—they'll want reasons."

"They'll get 'em," said Connolley grimly, "when the time comes. So long as I'm Captain of the Regulators, they'll obey orders and not ask questions."

"Well," said the Doctor, "perhaps you'll be good enough to tell us what you brought us here for—was it simply to say that we must go back? You may order your Regulators to return, but not us."

"Gentlemen," said Connolley with dignity, "you may please yourselves. But I can't lead this party any further, and I won't. I ain't alone in my notion, either, though 'twould a

been just the same if I were. Dan Strong is of my opinion, too."

"So am I," put in Vernet quietly. "Doctor, Connolley, just let *me* have the floor."

"Oh!" ejaculated the Doctor, and then subsided into silence, while Connolley, who only knew Vernet as a good-looking and somewhat venturesome young man "from the East," was silently amazed.

Vernet had thrown aside his careless air of following a leader, and he now spoke like a commander.

"Connolley is right," he said, "and Strong is right. We must go back to Caledonia—and if we get there without loss of life, we shall be very fortunate. That owl, the first which hooted, was Finlayson"—and he told briefly, what had occurred while they were in the bush.

"And you think there was an answering call?" asked the Doctor.

"I know it. It was a long way off. Of course I judged that it meant something and so I gave *my* series of 'tu whoos,' on the chance that they might prove somewhat confusing to the enemy. From the look on Finlayson's face I know I was right. But those answering calls—they were very near, and they, too, seemed to be unexpected—I don't know what to think of *them*."

"I'll tell you," broke in Connolley; "that was Strong. He told me so. He thinks as you do, sir, that the first call was from the robbers, and his scheme was the same as yours: to confuse them."

"Well, if we have succeeded in this, we shall get back to Caledonia with all our men. If not, there'll be the odds against us, for we don't know the enemies in our midst. I

doubt if Mack meant to let Connolley serve with us; he hoped better things of his drugged liquor. It's my opinion, too, that Dalton is as safe here as anywhere, even with Hicks against him. Mack had scattered the Regulators and drugged their leader in order to have a clear field for his mob of ruffians. Dalton would have had to fight for his life last night if it hadn't been for that stage-coach and Dan Strong."

"Umph!" said the Doctor, "I guess we are in accord on that point; Connolley *ought* to be willing to take our word for it."

"I am," said Connolley quite humbly.

"I hope," continued Vernet, "that we can prevail upon him to take our word for yet more. Mr. Connolley, since we agree that it's best to go back, may I ask what you intend to do next?"

"Eh?"

"How do you mean to explain—to manage it?"

"I don't mean to explain at all. In the morning I intend to muster my men for the march, and then tell them my mind." Evidently, from his tone, he expected the unqualified approval of his hearers.

"And what *is* your mind?" persisted Vernet.

"My mind!"—in a burst of indignation—"it's my mind to say my say once and for all! I'm goin' to tell 'em that Hicks and Finlayson are snakes in the grass—traitors! I'm going to tell them what they have done. I'm going to say that I won't command a band of men whom I can't swear by. And then I'm going to say that from the minute, the word, the Regulators are disbanded. *I* organized them; I disband them. They can go back to Caledonia and do as they like; I'm done with 'em *all!*"

He ended with an upward tone of triumphant self-approval; if his face had been visible through the darkness, they would have seen in it his expectation of approval from them. Instead of this, Doctor Mitchell's lips emitted a contemptuous "Umph!" and Van Vernet, after relieving himself by a quick, forcible gesture of impatience, said sharply, peremptorily:

"Ridiculous! Not to be thought of, Connolley!"

Connolley's self-approbation had been sorely tried, and this was too much.

"Look here," he said hotly, "I've stood a cussin' from the Doctor here, but hang me if I'm goin' to take it all around! I'd like to know what *you* mean by takin' such a high hand?"

As Doctor Mitchell was about to interpose, Vernet said quietly:

"Well, I think that you had better know what I mean. I *do* mean to hunt down these stage robbers, and I *don't* mean to let any man—even as honest a man as I believe you to be, Connolley—interfere with my plans by committing a blunder, though done with the best intentions in the world. It would be a fatal mistake to disband your Regulators here and now. But before I say why—Doctor, won't you just introduce me to Mr. Connolley? We can't afford to lose his confidence; he will be the very man we need—after he has ceased to be a Regulator."

"Umph!" said the Doctor; "I must say you have an abundance of patience and hope—*I'm* disgusted with Connolley for a thick-headed, obstinate, blind donkey. Why, you big Regulator, that man over there is one of the first *detectives* of this country. He's here expressly to root out these outlaws, and the Overland Stage Company has given him unlimited

authority to act for them. He's even got it in his power to call the United States troops to Caledonia and put the town under military control, if he sees fit. If you want to *do* something, Connolley, I advise you to cut loose from your band, give Mack a wide berth—for you're no match for him—and enlist unconditionally under Mr. Vernet."

The last half of the Doctor's tirade had quite obliterated the effect produced by the first; Connolley's natural resentment died away in surprise. In his helpless astonishment he turned toward Dalton.

"Is this so?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Dalton, "it's true. Mr Vernet is a well known New York detective. I have known him as such for years."

Connolley caught his breath, and was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his words carried to his listeners a bit of new and interesting intelligence.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he said, more than half to himself. "I wouldn't believe they were right about you, Mr. Dalton."

"How?" Dalton asked carelessly.

"Why, in their notion that you was in some way interested with the Overland. I said I guessed not."

As Dalton was about to reply, he felt a warning touch upon his arm. It was Vernet's hand, and he closed his lips.

"Now," said the Doctor, who seemed in perfect *rapport* with Vernet, "as time is precious, let's hear your ideas, Vernet; they'll be sure to interest Connolley."

Both he and Vernet knew their man. Connolley, crushed and convinced, and glad to escape a renewal of the Doctor's uncomplimentary frankness, muttered a low "Yes," and

Vernet began, addressing himself, with his usual tact, not to Connolley but to all.

"We will not enter into explanations now, gentlemen, but simply review the facts. To begin, I will say that I felt assured from the first that our raid would be a failure, and I think I have not been alone in this opinion."

"Dan Strong said the same thing!" broke in Connolley, in his surprise at the coincidence.

"No doubt he has his reasons," said Vernet, "as we have ours. I have become convinced that the men who ought to protect Caledonia are, in reality, its worst enemies. There's Mack, now; that Theatre of his brings him in money fast, he ought to be a rich man, and yet he is not satisfied. He is in a position to see and deal with all sorts of people; he is in everybody's confidence. Yet I firmly believe he is in collusion with a band of outlaws, and that it is he, more than our friend here, who controls the Regulators."

Connolley started and seemed about to speak.

"Wait," said Vernet. "I don't mean that all the Regulators are false, but that Mack has bought and owns some of them—two, at least; and that these manage to control when they can, and to circumvent when they can't control. That is why your robber hunts always turn out failures; why, when there is a crisis, and prompt action is needed, the Regulators are invariably scattered. Mack has, on his premises, a hidden rendezvous. He can meet outlaws, harbor them, plot with them, and never go out of his own door. Now what happened last night, when Strong called for volunteers? Only a few Regulators responded, but among these was Hedley. Ten minutes later, I saw Mack whisper a few words in his ear. They understood each other so well that Hedley only listened

and nodded. A moment later he told one of the volunteers that he was going after his horse. He went, and he has not been seen by any of us since. But I can tell you where he went. He mounted his horse and rode straight across the prairie to some outpost of the outlaws, to warn them of our movements. And Finlayson came with the party in order to furnish a means of communication. He made his first signal over there in the woods, and it was answered by Hedley or some other of the robbers. Perhaps they intended an ambush; perhaps only to mislead us. At any rate, the number of hoots given by Strong and myself must have puzzled them. Finlayson don't know what to do next; he will probably try to get away and warn his confederates, or explain to them."

" He can't do that," said Connolley; "Strong will look after him."

" Now, don't you see, Connelley," resumed Vernet, " that if you act as you propose, and disband your men, Finlayson, and such others as are traitorously inclined, would at once be free to give warning; to join their confederates, perhaps, and lead them in an attack on our disorganized party. These fellows know that if they could annihilate us, it would be a warning to all future searching parties."

There was a moment of silence, and then Connolley said quite humbly;

" I've been a blind fool; I can see it now. Convince me of the right and reason of a thing, and I'm with you. What shall I do?"

" I'll tell you," said Vernet. But he did not tell him then, for the Doctor uttered a quick " Hist," and they all turned their faces westward and listened.

"It may be Strong," whispered Connolley; and then he said, just above his breath, "Who comes?"

"A friend," answered a low voice from the bushes. And then appeared one of the two men whom Connolley had set to guard Finlayson.

"Strong sent me," he whispered, crouching down beside the smouldering fire, to bring his face upon a level with theirs. "Finlayson's tried to sneak off into the woods, and come purty near doin' it. Strong's sure there's somebody hangin' about in the bushes. He says ye'd better git back soon's ye can."

"Doctor," said Vernet promptly, "if you and Dalton will go to Strong, Mr. Connolley and I will join you in five minutes."

CHAPTER LXI.

CONNOLLEY RESIGNS.

It was Connolley himself who went about among the laggard ones, early next morning, rousing them and bidding them hasten. "We want to be in the saddle in half an hour," he said to them; "we've got a long ride before us."

But he did not name their destination until every man was mounted; then he reined his own horse out upon the roadside and raising himself in the stirrups called: "Attention, Regulators!"

The men promptly wheeled about and faced him.

"My men," he said slowly, "I have found that we started out with too many odds against us. We have made some dis-

coveries that justify me in ordering a right about face. I want to see the edge of Caledonia before sundown. I ain't got no explanation to make here: when we get back I'll tell ye why we have concluded to give up this hunt. Pete Finlayson, I want you to ride ahead with Dan Strong. Doctor Mitchell and Mr. Dalton have volunteered to lead Hicks' horse, and see to his wounded hand. Now, boys, forward—keep close together, quiet and orderly—straight for Caledonia."

Dan Strong and Finlayson turned their horses northward, and the two Regulators who had slept beside Finlayson took place behind them without a word, and, such is the force of example combined with mystery, the others, exchanging glances of wonder, and questions and comments in undertones, fell into line, and the whole cavalcade, Strong at its head, and Connolley and Vernet bringing up the rear, rode back toward Caledonia.

Once, when they were a long way toward Death Pass, Doctor Mitchell dropped back and reined his horse close beside Vernet's.

"I've been thinking of what Connolley said about Dalton," he remarked. "If it was true, it would explain some things."

"If what was true?" asked Vernet.

"Why, the idea that somebody has got the notion that Dalton might be a Secret Service Agent."

"Pshaw! do you think that any one really has that notion?"

"You heard Connolley," replied the Doctor. "Didn't you do something, make some sign, to prevent Dalton's speaking on this subject?"

"Why, yes. I didn't consider his denial necessary just then. It won't do any harm to let Connolley believe him a detective."

"Well," said the Doctor, "I never should have thought it."

"Don't think of it now. Dalton's a gentleman of leisure, and not a detective. I suppose Mack has trumped up this notion for the benefit of his lawless confederates, to get them to further his schemes the more easily."

"Then you haven't suspected that possibly Selwyn may have dropped a hint of this sort to Mack?"

Vernet looked thoughtful.

"There might be something in that," he said. "I must discuss it with Stanhope."

"How did you settle it with him?" asked the Doctor, nodding toward Connolley, who was riding a little to one side of them.

"Capitally; we understand each other. He will act with us, and be a valuable help. He has got his cue, and I don't think he will make any more mistakes."

"I saw you talking with Strong this morning," ventured the Doctor, after a time.

"Yes. That man's a host in himself; he meets you half way, and understands a hint. We've planned our next expedition already."

"Umph! May I inquire how many Regulators you mean to take next time?"

"One," answered Vernet smiling. "When we go out again it will be to conquer, but not by numbers."

"How then?"

"By strategy."

When the robber hunters, voluntarily returning from their abandoned chase, had reached the outskirts of the town, Connolley halted them.

"Men," he said, "what I am going to say, is just this:

We set out to hunt stage robbers, and if some of ye aren't satisfied with the way the thing's ended, I don't blame ye. There was an idea amongst us that some spies were in the bush last night, and that if we had waited we might a had a skrimmage. Now, I guess you all know *me* well enough to be sure that I wasn't *scared* out. If our enemies had all been *in the bushes*, we'd a been there this minute; but the enemies we had to fear most was amongst *ourselves*, just waiting a chance to stab or shoot us in the back. There wasn't a ghost of a show for honest fightin' or for anything but jest *murder*. If I'd a found this out afore we started, there wouldn't been any start. If I hadn't found it out at all half of us—the *honest* half, most likely—would a been corpses afore night. Sence we've been a organized band, and ye've called me Captain, we've had some robber hunts, *and we've allus failed*. We couldn't see why. Now I say, from the very first we've had *traitors* amongst us. See if ye can't put two and two together. I aint a goin' to point 'em out, nor to name 'em; there aint no need."

He paused a moment and then resumed:

"Now men, honest Regulators and dishonest, as I was the one to organize this band, I am the one to say that the Regulators of Caledonia are disbanded, from this time out, and I *do* say it. I give up my office of Captain. You're your own men. Boys—you that are true blue—I'm sorry we must part this way, but it's the only way. I'm sorry I can't tell you my reasons for doin' as I am doin', but I can't. Now I say to you, do yer duty by yourselves and each other, and don't trust *any man* till you've tried him."

His voice fell rather huskily at the last, and with the final word he waved his hand, turned his horse's head, and rode slowly toward Caledonia.

It had been agreed that they should separate upon reaching the town, and when Connolley turned, Doctor Mitchell made a stiff little farewell gesture to Vernet and Dalton, and rode straight toward his cottage. Then Dan Strong, seeming to waken from a state of profound surprise, struck his horse smartly, and without one glance at the others galloped after Connolley.

At this moment a young man with keen, blue eyes, and a clear, resonant voice, rode out from among the Regulators, who had remained in their places, each seemingly waiting for the other to move.

"Boys", he said, wheeling and facing them, "before we break ranks I'd like to say a word to ye." He paused and glanced askance at Vernet and Dalton.

"We are *de trop*," said Vernet, smiling; and he touched his hat to the assembled band and rode townward, followed by his friend.

As they were nearing their hotel, there came the sound of galloping feet behind them, and then Finlayson dashed past, accompanied by a dark faced man, who turned his head to bestow upon Vernet a grin and a significant wink.

"There's mischief brewing," said Vernet, looking after the flying horsemen.

"Where?" asked Dalton.

"Among those disbanded Regulators. That man with Finlayson is one of the two whom Connolley set to watch him last night; and the one who addressed the men, as we left them, was the other. They both have good reason to think Finlayson *one* of the traitors."

CHAPTER LXII.

A QUIET WEEK.

That evening, beginning at sundown, Van Vernet held a strange audience in Doctor Mitchell's cottage.

First, it was Vernet, Dalton and Doctor Mitchell who talked long and animatedly, seeming finally to agree, and to understand each other perfectly. Then the Doctor and Dalton left the cottage and went townward.

Soon after Connolley came, and when he and Vernet had consulted earnestly for half an hour, and apparently had settled some vexed question, Vernet changed the subject by asking abruptly:

"Connolley, had you and your Regulators no penalty for traitors?"

"Why, yes," replied Connolley, "we had."

"What was it?"

"Death, after a fair hearing, if the crime was proved."

"I wonder," ventured Vernet, "that some of your men didn't demand the name of the traitors.'

"They knew better," said their late leader. "If I'd a had positive *proof*, I was bound to name the man; If not, I couldn't name him. They all understood *my* position. It was part of our obligation."

"But," persisted Vernet, "surely you had sufficient proof against that fellow Hicks."

"Hicks? Oh, yes; but *he* wasn't a Regulator. He wanted to join, but I wouldn't accept him."

"Oh, ho! But you set two of your men to watching Finlayson last night. You had to tell *them* something?"

"Yes; I told them that Finlayson needed watching. That was enough. They're sharp fellows; sharper than me—they've told me more than once that Finlayson was crooked."

"Well," said Vernet, "I rather think these two men mean to try and locate the treachery."

"Let 'em!" said Connolley grimly.

When Connolley had gone, Vernet sat for some time alone. Then a light tap announced a new visitor, and he sprang up, his face brightening. It was Charlie Carson, who entered, and Vernet's countenance fell.

"Where's Dick?" he asked quickly.

"He couldn't come. He's watching at Mack's with both eyes."

"What is it? anything new?"

"Well, I don't just know. He's making friends with Kit Duncan, one of Mack's hoppers"—"hoppers" was Charlie's idiom for dancers—"and he's got a sharp lookout on a little singer named Harry Hatch. There's another thing: he told me to tell you that the Regulators were up to something. They're gathering on the quiet, and a couple of them are sticking so tight to Finlayson that he can't get out of their sight."

An hour later Doctor Mitchell came back and Connolley was with him.

"I've persuaded him to sleep here," said the Doctor to Vernet, who was about to return to his hotel.

Vernet had been gone half an hour, and the Doctor and Connolley were still smoking and talking, when footsteps came hurriedly up to the door, and a loud, quick rap roused them.

It was one of Mack's bar-keepers who stood before them when the Doctor opened the door.

"Is Connolley—," he began, and then his eyes fell upon the ex-chieftain. "Oh, Connolley, here you are! I'd like to see you outside for a minute."

"I guess you can say anything that's on your mind right here," said Connolley, without rising.

"But it's a message from Mack."

"I'd come outside for you quicker'n I would for Mack, Jim. Out with it."

"Well, Mack's got wind that a lot of your Regulators are down on Finlayson, and likely to do him mischief. He wants you to come up and try to quiet them."

"Tell Mack he's out of his head," said Connolley coolly. "There ain't any Regulators. And tell Mack that he can get the same mob that was ready to attack Dalton last night, to protect Finlayson."

"Then you won't come?" asked the messenger.

Connolley turned about in his chair and placed his feet upon a camp-stool.

"Not much," he said, over his shoulder.

The first man who rode out of town to the southward next morning, found the body of Finlayson hanging to a beam that was elevated upon two tall, newly set posts.

Caledonia was scattered over a treeless plain, and Finlayson's executioners had erected that impromptu and exceedingly simple gallows in order to leave the body of the traitor hanging on the very spot where the Regulators had been disbanded.

No attempt was made to punish the perpetrators of this deed.

"Ye see, we can't hang *all* the Regulators," said an oracle

to a knot of corner gossips, "and they won't peach on each other. The honest ones won't, and the guilty ones dassent."

"I knew them fellows was up to mischief," said Dan Strong, "but 'taint for me to be too inquisitive about who done it."

"*No*, sir," said Connolley, in answer to an insinuation, "I didn't have no part in it. But if ever we find the *head* of these sneakin' go-betweens who pretend to be good citizens and are all the time in cahoots with the robbers, I'll take a hand in *that* hangin', now you bet!"

Vernet and Dalton drove to the ranch that morning. They told the story of the day before to Barbara and Mag, and brought away with them the letters Vernet had desired, and an excellent photograph of Stephen Wray.

"We have decided to keep the guns you were good enough to lend us, Miss Drood," said Vernet to Mag, when they were about to go. "We are making a little collection of arms," and he laughed lightly.

"Keep them," said Mag heartily; "and take more if you like."

"Thank you," said Vernet. 'Miss Wray, have you made the acquaintance of the arsenal?"

"That she has," cried Mag, seeing that Barbara blushed and hesitated. "She's been practising pistol-shooting, and she's doing well."

"Really?" asked Vernet, still looking to Barbara for his answer.

"Yes," she assented; "I've broken the ice. I don't think even an arrant flatterer could call me a good shot but I've learned to load a pistol, and I think I could fire it without hitting my-

self, or—" with a side glance at Dalton—"shutting my eyes."

"You haven't been perfectly candid," said Dalton, smiling. "You did not say without fear. Confess; were you not afraid of the thing?"

"Horribly, at first," she admitted.

"And now?" queried Vernet.

"Now? Why, it's only a test of the nerves after all. I am no longer afraid of the weapon. Mag says I'm going to be a marksman. Won't that be an accomplishment to take with me to the East?" Then suddenly her countenance saddened and her eyes fell, at the thought of her father.

"Courage," said Vernet in a low tone, and extending his hand; "we have all things to hope for. I shall begin now to report progress regularly, Miss Wray; every day, perhaps."

"Oh, thank you," she said impulsively. "It will be such a relief, even if your news is ever so little."

He was as good as his word. Every day during the week that followed, he drove, with Dalton, over the velvety prairie to the home of Mountain Mag. Usually they made these visits after an early breakfast, dining at twelve with Mag and Barbara, and then back to Caledonia before evening.

One day, Stanhope, who, in the character of Dick Carson, and living in the same house with Vernet and Dalton, was much in their society, manifested a desire to supplant Dalton. His request, of course, was proffered in the absence of the latter, who only knew him as Charlie Carson's brother.

"I think it can be managed, Dick," Vernet answered, "if you make your request in Dalton's hearing. I've a half notion that these long trips bore him a little."

"So have I," said Stanhope significantly.

Vernet turned and eyed his friend keenly.

"Dick," he said, "you've got some idea or information that you're keeping from me."

Stanhope laughed. "Haven't you enough on your mind, old fellow? You'll get the benefit of all my 'ideas' in good time." And here the subject dropped.

"Where do you two fellows ride to every day?" said Stanhope later, when Dalton had joined them, and all three were smoking on the hotel porch. "I wish there was room for three."

"There is," said Vernet, "on the prairie."

"Oh, I know you go *somewhere*. Charlie says there are ladies at some ranch out yonder. I wish one of you, whichever one it is that takes the other, would take me for a change."

"Why," said Dalton, looking up from his cigar, "it wouldn't be an unpleasant trip for you, Carson. If you'll agree to do my duty, fill my place—"

"All right; what is it?" answered Stanhope promptly.

"I might let you go in my stead," finished Dalton. "I go to take care of Morgan, here; solely to take care of him."

"Well, anybody could do that."

"Why, Dalton," said Vernet, as if it had just occurred to him, "maybe you would like a day to yourself. If so, I can take this chap."

As a result of this ingenuous dialogue it was Stanhope, instead of Dalton, who rode with Vernet to the ranch next day. As they were about to set out, Dalton approached Stanhope and placed a hand upon his arm.

"Carson," he said, "I hope you will do your duty."

"What is it?" asked Charlie Carson's supposed brother.

"There are two ladies at the ranch. Be sure you pay

enough attention to one—and not too much to the other."

Stanhope looked up quickly, caught the meaning smile in Dalton's face, and, in the same glance, the flush that mounted to Vernet's.

"Oh, ho!" he thought, as he rode away with his friend; "I wonder if Van *is* caught."

But he said nothing, this astute young man. Only, when they were arrived at the ranch, he made good use of his eyes, and formed his own conclusions.

The week passed in comparative quiet. Thrilling things cannot be constantly happening, even in Caledonia.

The *fiasco* of the robber hunt created, naturally, some excitement, but its one apparent result, the tragic end of Finlayson, served as a sop to the blood-thirsty, and saved the affair from the otherwise flat and stale *finale* which Caledonians could endure least of all things. The Regulators went their several ways by mutual consent. Connolley was taciturn and refused to be interviewed. A stillness and an air of mystery brooded over the place. Prophecies ran riot; predictions were to be had for the asking. Signs and omens were everywhere. It was rumored that the Regulators were reorganizing in secret, strengthening their numbers, and planning a fresh raid.

Some said that the town was to be put under military discipline; others, that suspected Regulators were soon to be lynched. People conversed in groups, whispered and wagged their heads Dishonest men watched honest ones, and *vice versa*. It was a week of waiting and unfulfilled expectation.

One of the two men who had shared with Dan Strong that fatal stage-coach adventure, the one who was going home to

his waiting sweetheart, died during this week, with her name on his lips.

The other, under the watchful care of Father Miles, was slowly coming back to life. The good man obtained the consent of Doctor Mitchell, and had his patient carried to his own humble sod house, away from the discords of the town, and remained there with him, attentive and watchful.

Doctor Mitchell, Strong and Connolley went about silent, yet alert, each intent upon the work he had taken upon himself to do. Vernet, coming and going to and from the ranch by day, closeted with one or the other of his confederates at night, or on duty at Mack's—outside when Stanhope was within; inside when he was without—and throwing into all that he did a zest, an enthusiasm, a relish, which he did not stop to analyze. Dalton, quietly but firmly persisting in his purpose of "seeing the play played out," and waiting for Aileen. Stanhope, here, there, everywhere; now coquetting with Kit Duncan in Mack's "balcony," now treating Harry Hatch at Mack's bar, now watching the "private entrance" outside.

All, during this quiet week, were busy, and the work of each was bringing nearer the end for which they labored.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THEORIES.

On the last day of this week of outward calm with its strange, strange undercurrent, Vernet chose Stanhope to pay with him a visit to Mag and Barbara Wray.

"I'm going to have a kind of summing-up of the case, for Miss Wray's benefit, to-day," Vernet said as they rode across the prairies. "I wish to make everything look as promising as I can, before we set out, and yet I don't want her to know what we are going to do. But I will make a full explanation of our plans to Mag. I tell you, Dick, that girl is one in a thousand! I shall not attempt to deceive *her*, and I shall depend upon you to entertain Miss Wray while I have a few words with Mag."

"All right," answered Stanhope and then he sang lightly:

"O, I can be happy with either,
When t'other dear charmer's way,"

Vernet glanced around at him sharply, and they both laughed.

"Dick, your grit and good spirits are invaluable to the rest of us. You tone down our tragedy. I wish you would reveal yourself to Dalton; the fellow's growing melancholy, in spite of his apparent indifference to all things."

Stanhope's face became instantly grave.

"Van," he said "what you wish has become more distasteful to me than ever. But I want to put it all out of my mind until our expedition is over. Perhaps—" he paused abruptly.

"Perhaps it will end our troubles for some of us, that expedition," added Vernet. "Is that it, Dick? Yes; you're right enough! It may be you, or I, or Dalton. I wish he would stay behind. It's none of *his* business, this outlaw hunt,"

"For God's sake, don't try to keep *him* back!" cried Stanhope. "I tell you, Van, if the thing I suspect is true—" Again he paused abruptly.

"Dick," cried Vernet facing about, "in Heaven's name, *what* have you discovered?"

"It can't be called a discovery *yet*," said Stanhope, more composedly. "You will be the first to hear it, Van, when the time comes. When we all get back—"

"If we do get back," interrupted Vernet, suddenly falling into a mood of gloom.

"Oh, we will," exclaimed Stanhope, with a quick return of his inconsequent manner.

When they reached the ranch they found Mountain Mag and her fair guest engaged in pistol-practice, and while they were exchanging greetings, Vernet said to Mag in a low tone:

"Before we go, I must talk with you alone."

She answered him by a quick glance of intelligence, and he passed on to greet Barbara.

"We have come to-day, Miss Wray," he said, "to make a little semi-official report of what has been done, and to tell you what we are about to do."

When they were all seated in Mag's airy sitting-room, he took a paper from his pocket and unfolded it, saying:

"I have jotted down the items of such discoveries as we have made, Miss Wray, and have ranged them all here so that we may see just where we stand. To begin, then, the photograph of Mr. Wray has been recognized by several people. First, by Father Miles, who saw the original, he believes, and conversed with him. They met in the town accidentally, and parted before Father Miles had learned his name. The gentleman seemed perfectly at his ease, and impressed the good father as a man well able to take care of himself. There are others who remember seeing him about the town. In short,

there's no doubt of his having been here, and having been at the St. Charles, but—" he paused and turned his eye quietly toward Barbara—" he was not known here as Stephen Wray."

"Oh," cried the girl sharply, her face full of alarm.

"There is a name upon the register in his handwriting. It has his initials reversed; you might almost say it is his name reversed. It is William Stephens, New York."

Barbara put her hand to her head. She began to look bewildered.

"I can't understand it," she said; "why should Papa do that?"

"Why should he change his name, you mean? It might not be difficult to guess his motive. Your father, perhaps, reasoned that to make himself known here as Mr. Wray, a New York millionaire, might attract unpleasant attentions from disagreeable people. He may have had money or valuable papers with him, and no fancy for being robbed. On the whole, I think the supposition quite natural."

Vernet glanced again at Barbara, but she was sitting with her hands clutching each other, listening, waiting breathlessly.

"Having satisfied ourselves of his presence in Caledonia, we found out, after some trouble, that a man resembling Mr. Wray took passage in one of the Rockville stages—"

"Oh!" breathed Barbara, turning white.

"And that twice he changed his plan, or seemed to, and delayed his journey. Now, Miss Wray, thus far we are reasonably sure that it is your father whose movements we have been tracing. Beyond this all is surmise. It is known that a stage, leaving a few days after Mr. Wray postponed his journey for the second time, carried two passengers. One of these is a fellow who comes and goes between here and Rockville, gen-

erally considered a 'hard case', and believed to be more outlaw than miner. All the description we can get of the other is, that he was an elderly, well-dressed man. Now, we are going to suppose this man to have been Mr. Wray."

Barbara's pale face grew still paler, and Mountain Mag involuntarily moved nearer to her.

"We will suppose him to have been Mr. Wray," repeated Vernet, "and that he set out for Rockville, the second passenger in the coach. In this case, for want of more positive evidence, to guide us, we decide to adopt the theory that shapes itself to our hand. Miss Wray, let us suppose that your father comes here, as he did come, lured by promises and representations from one upon whom he believes he can rely. Let us suppose that he comes to purchase mining stock—do you think that probable?"

"Yes; I think it very probable."

"To do this, then, he must have brought with him money or securities to a large amount. If he did, it would account for his effort to hide his identity under a fictitious name. Let us next suppose that he arrives here expecting to meet this person whose representations have brought him to the West; that he does not find him, but a letter, instead, telling him to wait. He waits, and while waiting informs his correspondent, who, we will say, is in Rockville, of his change of name and also, because of this same change, he tells his daughter not to write to him."

"Oh!" exclaimed Barbara. "I feel that you are right!"

"Now, let us further suppose that Mr. Wray, learning that his correspondent is in Rockville, writes him to come down the mountains, and waits for him a few days. Then, becoming impatient, he decides to go to Rockville, and engages pas-

sage in the stage. Then a letter comes, bidding him wait. Finally he goes, and there are only two passengers in the coach. The driver is one Samuels, who has not been long in the Company's service. Now, Miss Wray—I beg that you won't be alarmed at what I am saying; it is all theory from this point, remember—suppose there is a man, powerful in Rockville and Caledonia, a speculator and stock gambler perhaps, who has set on foot a gigantic scheme for profit. He goes East to interest capitalists in this scheme, which may have been, in the beginning, a fair one. Suppose that, after your father has set out for this place, the bubble bursts; a fortune is slipping out of the grasp of the schemer. *Then* he conceives another idea. He can command or buy any number of desperadoes, and he lays his plans. He contrives to have his victim detained in Caledonia, by letter, until a coach goes up the mountain manned to suit his purpose—that is, with only two passengers, and one of these his tool, and with a driver who is, doubtless, in his pay. At a convenient point the coach may be waylaid, and the two passengers made prisoners; one of them, of course, to be released; the other—held for ransom, perhaps."

Barbara Wray started up, and Mag, fearing an outbreak of grief or terror, moved impulsively toward her. But to the surprise of all, the girl turned and walked steadily up and down the room three or four times. Her lips were tightly pressed together, as if to keep back all signs of emotion, and she was very pale. Presently she recovered her self-control and paused before Vernet.

"You say, *perhaps* the coach was waylaid," she said slowly. "Did not the driver come back? What has become of the other passenger?"

"Oh!" said Vernet, with a look of approval, "I wondered if you would think of that. The driver came back, resigned his position, and started East the same day. The other passenger—Nixon was his name—has not been seen in Caledonia since, although a certain Rockville miner, Dan Strong, says that he is now and then visible in Rockville."

"And why—why do you think that my father is held for ransom? May he not have been—murdered?" She shuddered as she spoke the word, yet spoke it firmly.

"If the stage was halted, Miss Wray, and if your father had upon his person any large sum of money, they might have taken that and let him go. It would have been the simplest way. If, on the contrary, he was too wise to carry a large sum of money about with him, but had, instead, securities not negotiable by others, or that were without value until his signature was attached, they might then have resolved to hold him until he signed these papers, or consented to ransom himself at a handsome figure".

"Stop," said Barbara excitedly. "Tell me, do you think that it *was* my father who went in that stage?"

"I think so, Miss Wray, and I am not alone in that opinion!"

"Then you must be right. I am determined to hope that you *are* right. But why, if my father is held in the mountains for ransom, why, in sending for me, did he not bid me bring money? If he were not ill, as he said—" She paused suddenly, and her face blanched at the new thought that brought terror with it.

"Miss Wray," said, Vernet, rising and standing close beside her, "those letters have been carefully examined by persons who are experienced in the analysis of handwriting, and I believe them to be forgeries."

"What! and my father, then, did not write for me?"

"I do not think he wrote those letters."

Barbara sank suddenly in the nearest chair, and buried her face in her hands.

"Then he is dead," she mourned; "and I—"

Vernet was instantly at her side. He drew his chair close to her and said gently:

"Miss Wray, if these letters are forgeries, they are the strongest of proofs that your father is living. Perhaps he has been obstinate and refused to buy his freedom, and these villains have schemed to get you here in order to appeal to you or—" He paused; a sharp ejaculation had fallen from Mountain Mag's lips.

"It's nothing," said Mag in answer to his look of inquiry, but she shot him a warning glance.

Barbara's hands had fallen from her face. She saw it all and understood instantly.

"Or," she said, looking from one to the other, "in order to work upon his fears for my safety."

"Well," said Vernet, "all this, you know, is supposition."

"It is inspiration!" cried Barbara. "I am sure that Papa would never start upon such a journey with much money about him. I am sure, too, that he carried valuable papers. And I am *very* confident that he would not yield to their demands unless—unless they could reach him through his fears for me. Tell me," starting up, "how can we act upon this? Something *must* be done."

"Something will be done, Miss Wray. The first step will be, I think, to find this man, Nixon, if he is to be found. To do this, we must go to Rockville. We shall be gone some days; perhaps a week. Can you wait in patience and in

hope? When we come back, I think we shall bring good news."

"I will try," she said faintly, but she did not look very hopeful.

Before they left the ranch, Mag and Stanhope, two valuable allies, made for Vernet the opportunity to converse with Mag alone. In this interview he was very frank, telling the strong-hearted Mountain girl all that they had planned, all that they hoped and feared. From this interview Mag came back to Barbara with a face profoundly serious, and with a clear knowledge of what part she might have to play in the coming drama, or tragedy—which it was to be, no one could foretell.

When they parted, Barbara and Vernet were very courageous and very calm. But Vernet sighed heavily as he rode away, and Barbara followed him with her solemn eyes, and in a visible tremor, until Mag laid a hand upon her arm and said:

"It's a sign of bad luck to watch a person out of sight. Come in."

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE SECRET CHAMBER.

Darkness was settling down upon Caledonia when Charlie Carson ran briskly up the stairs of the St. Charles, and hastening along the narrow hall, paused at the door of his own room, inserted a key in the lock and noiselessly entered.

The shade before the single window was lowered, but Charlie knew where to place his hand upon matches and a small lamp, and soon it was dimly illuminated.

At the moment when the light flashed up, there was a sound and a movement behind Charlie, and he turned quickly just as a dark form reared itself and sat upright on the bed.

"Oh, is it you, Charlie?"

"Well I should rather think so. I'd like to know what waked you. You were snoring sweetly when I came in, and I've made no sound."

"It was the light," explained Stanhope, yawning and getting off the bed to stretch himself. "You needn't come around me with a light when you want me to sleep; thunder wouldn't wake me half so quick. What time is it, Charlie?"

"Oh, it's early enough; not fairly dark outside. Do you feel refreshed?"

"Yes; I'm all right; ready to make a night of it if necessary. Raise that lamp a bit, Charlie; I must make myself charming. I'll take a look at our friend in the private asylum for single gentleman early to-night, for I mean to bestow considerable of my valuable society upon Mack and Miss Duncan."

He was standing before the small mirror, and laughed as he fitted on a jaunty mustache.

"Poor little Frenchy," he said, "I'll have to discard you to-morrow and show my naked countenance to a heartless world. Charlie, I think you'll have to crop my hair. I must not run the risk of any wig or toggery of that sort to-morrow. I'm going in prepared to come to close quarters."

"I can't give it a very slick cut," said Charlie, referring to the hair.

"I don't want anything of that kind. I want to be cropped like a young Swede just landed."

"Oh! in that case, I guess I can fix you."

The band was beginning its first quickstep before the door of Mack's, and the street about the front of the house presented a lively aspect when Charlie Carson came, by a round-about way, to the Theatre. He did not approach its front entrance, but came, instead, close to the corner, in the rear, that was nearest Mack's office. He moved quietly, not to attract to himself needless attention, but yet boldly, with an off-hand air, as if he had nothing to conceal.

When he found that he was unobserved, and that Mack's office was dark, he glided along the rear fence, keeping close to it, and stopping at every few steps to listen. When he had reached the northwest corner of the enclosure, he halted and peered cautiously around it.

A dark figure was standing silent and moveless against the fence. There was a quick interchange of low, very low, clucks, as signals of safety, and then Charlie whispered:

"Here we are. All ready?"

"Yes."

Charlie unbuttoned his loose coat, and began to revolve like a top, uncoiling, by this manœuvre, a light ladder of strong cords, that had been wound about his body, and which the other coiled deftly again, standing finally with the end which had a strong iron hook attached, in his right hand.

"All right, Charlie," he whispered. "Just you wait here—at any rate until I see how the land lies. I only want to take a look now; I'm coming back later. Now then."

He stood close to the wall, with his face turned inward, and Charlie, who was the shorter and lighter of the two,

stepped quickly out of his low shoes, and putting his two hands upon Stanhope's collar, mounted easily to his shoulders. Then Stanhope's right hand went up. Charlie took the hook and deftly caught it over the top of the fence, drawing up one end of the ladder, and dropping it into the enclosure between the two fences. Then he clambered lightly over and down upon the other side.

There was a moment of stillness and then came a soft tap upon the board against which Stanhope's ear was pressed. He stooped instantly, took up Charlie's discarded shoes, stowed them in his deep side-pockets, and began to climb the rope ladder.

This exploit was no new thing to them. Every night for more than a week these two had paid a visit to the secluded portion of Mack's fortification, and when Stanhope was upon the ground beside Charlie not a moment was lost in needless consultation. Stanhope again placed himself against the outer palings and Charlie again mounted to his shoulders. This time he dropped to the ground with the ladder of rope trailing after him. Then Stanhope placed himself against the inner fence, and again Charlie adjusted the hook. This time, however, he did not go over the fence, but dropped back, instead, beside Stanhope.

"The way seems clear, he whispered.

Stanhope unburdened his pockets of the shoes, and climbed to the top of the second fence, with its ornamentation of iron spikes, two of which he removed, and thus easily passed between those on either side, and so down to the ground.

And now Stanhope is fairly within Mack's closely guarded premises. He stands still a moment, listening and peering about him through the darkness. A very faint light, shining

from the window of the place Stanhope has been pleased to call Mack's secret chamber, guides them toward it. But he approaches neither door nor window. He goes, instead, straight to the angle of the wall, where the detached room touches the main building. The walls of the secret chamber are of rough stones, and it is not difficult for Stanhope to climb by the help of their projections and the bracing power afforded by the angle, to the low roof which slopes from the front, like that of a shed.

Once upon this roof he lies prostrate, and his hands come in contact with something in the very centre. The roof is not shingled without, nor plastered within. Below is a ceiling of thin painted boards and the top is tightly covered with matched lumber, which is overlaid with narrow strips where the boards are joined. A week ago he had drilled through this, working slowly and cautiously, and removed a small square block. Underneath this block he has pierced the ceiling, and has three small holes through which he can see much, but not all, that is transpiring below. As a precaution against possible rains, he has fitted over the block an extra piece of wood, and now he removes board and block, and applies his eye to one of the small openings.

The room into which he looks is well lighted and comfortably furnished. At the back is a bed, much tumbled, and a washstand that bears evidence of frequent use. Near the centre is a small table, with the remnants of a substantial meal upon it. And beside the table a man is sitting—a man with a fine head, covered with abundant, but closely cropped hair; with a firm chin and handsome mouth, above which grows a small moustache, neatly trimmed, and blonde like the hair. The eyes are blue, and keen, and serious; clearly not the eyes

"He removes block and board, and applies his eye to one of the small openings."—Page 398.

of a humorist. Their light knows but three gradations: they are severe, or piercing, or steadfast, always. The face is pale, and its pallor is the finishing touch that makes it a face of refinement. He looks like one who should be, must be, gravely courteous, chivalric to heroism, loyal to the end. And yet this man with the noble head and refined face is a man in hiding, a man suspected of murder. He is Cool Hank Dutton, and as yet, Stanhope is ignorant of his identity.

He rises now, and begins to pace the floor, and then Stanhope could observe, if he were not already familiar with the fact, that the form is tall, and lithe, and muscular. He looks strong, nothwithstanding ten days of racking pain and close confinement. One hand, grown white like his face in that sunless room, hangs loosely at his side, where it clinches and unclinches itself; the other rests before his breast, in a sling. He is thinking deeply, and not too contentedly. His face, as he walks to and fro, is severe, and his lips are set in straight, firm lines. Sometimes he lifts his clenched hand in a gesture that may mean menace, or defiance.

Stanhope watches him for some moments, as he has watched him nightly for more than a week, and then concludes that he will return to Charlie. All seems well in the secret chamber; at least all appears as he expected to find it.

"He won't be likely to leave this place until he is rid of that sling," Stanhope had said to himself, and he was annoyed because he always found this man in solitude.

"Is he shunned, or does he shun society?" he had said to Vernet. "I'd give a good deal to see him and Mack together; to know on what terms they stand."

"I suppose Mack visits him by day," said Vernet, in reply to this. "He isn't often absent from his 'Place,' as he calls it, at night."

As the last wail of the band rends the air, and Stanhope is about to lift his hand and replace the block of wood, he sees the man halt abruptly, directly under him, and seem to listen.

Stanhope listens too, and he hears, or thinks he does, a low double knock upon the door below. Then he sees the man move quickly toward it, and although he has now passed beyond the range of his sight, he knows, by the sounds, that the door is being unbarred and opened. He quickly relinquishes his design of speedy departure, and with a thought for poor Charlie, cooling his heels between the two fences, again presses his face close to the holes in the ceiling. He sees the occupant of the room come back to the table and sit down, and then the visitor appears, drawing up a chair and seating himself opposite.

Stanhope silently congratulates himself. The visitor is Mack.

CHAPTER LXV.

A LION IN A NET.

The face of the occupant of the secret chamber, as he turns it upon his visitor, is neither pleased nor expectant. It is simply severely blank. But Mack's face is as bland as Spring. He beams upon his *vis a vis* as he seats himself.

"Well, Hank," he says, rubbing one hand over the other, after a fashion peculiar to him, "how do you find yourself now?"

"*Hank!*" Stanhope has heard distinctly, but for fear he

should lose a word of what may follow, he withdraws his eye from the orifice, and applies his ear instead.

"I'm stifling," says the other shortly. "I must get out of this."

"Yes, yes," says Mack quickly; "of course—of course. That arm was a bad affair. It couldn't have happened at a worse time, the whole thing."

"What 'whole thing?'" asked the man he had called Hank, resting his keen eyes upon Mack's face.

"Why, your quarrel with Selwyn, his death, and your wound, you know, and all at a time when you and Selwyn both were so much needed. Hank, I wish you would trust me about that business!"

"What business?"

"Oh, pshaw! that quarrel, and all the rest of it."

Hank kept his eyes steadily fixed upon Mack's face.

"You've said something like this before," he remarked, as if the words had made no impression upon him.

A little of Mack's suavity fell away from him.

"Well," he said, "we never did quite understand each other, and there's a good deal to be understood. *I've* been perfectly frank with *you*."

"Yes!"—still speaking in the same even tone. "Let me see. You've told me, for instance, that Duke Selwyn has been shot; and when I asked for details, you treated the question as a joke, and gently insinuated that it was *I* who shot him."

"Well, you didn't deny it."

"Perhaps I should have done so, if, before I had rallied from my surprise, you had not come down upon me with the information that my mysterious absence, and the fact that I had quarreled with Selwyn, was taken by the people outside

as proof of my guilt. *You* appeared to consider the matter settled."

"There's one thing I didn't tell you. Dalton has offered a big reward for the apprehension of Selwyn's murderer."

"Well," said Hank coolly, "I suppose that settles *my* chances. Of course, you don't mean to let a big reward slip through your fingers?"

"Upon my word, one would think you *wanted* me to give you up!" cried Mack.

"Well, I'm getting a little tired of this place, and I'm rather fond of excitement, you know."

Mack got up with an angry gesture, and then sat down as if he had heretofore been only joking.

"Come, Hank," he said, with an effort to return to his bland atmosphere, "let's be serious. Selwyn told me, the very day he was killed, that you had gone clear back on our project. Afterwards, he said, you met him on the street, and were less unreasonable; that you agreed to meet him and me next morning, and talk the matter over."

"Well," said Cool Hank, "thus far all is correct."

Mack thrust his head forward, and put a world of meaning in his tone.

"*Did you intend to keep your word?*"

"No; I had no intention of so doing."

"That was just a blind?"

"I could call it by a better name, but that will do."

"Look here, Hank, were you in earnest in all that you said to Selwyn about that business?"

"Yes."

"And haven't you changed your mind?"

"No."

"I suppose you know that you will be expected to take Selwyn's place, and what that means?"

"Mack, drop this subject."

"I tell you it can't *be* dropped. We've got to understand each other."

"We do understand each other." The speaker's eyes began to throw out a steely light; there was a red spot now on either cheek. "*I* understand that unless I agree to carry out Selwyn's damnable plans to the end, you will denounce me as Selwyn's murderer. *You* understand, if you know me at all, that I'll not touch the business."

"Look here, Hank Dutton, if you had only me to fear you'd be safe enough. You say you want to get out of here. What do you intend to do when you leave this place?"

"I'll tell you,"—the light in the blue eyes deepened. "I'm going to begin right where I left off. I told Selwyn, that day on the street, that I'd meet you both, because I wanted to keep him in town. I wanted a clear field. I meant by influence, force, or strategy, to carry my point."

"I see," said Mack dryly.

"I wish *I* did," thought Stanhope, on the roof.

"Unfortunately," went on Cool Hank, "I got into a shooting scrape, and it disarranged my plans."

"At any rate, you got off better than the other fellow."

"Did I?" musingly. "Well, I don't know. One thing is certain; I didn't expect to be brought here."

"That's what I can't understand—how the boys came to mix you and Selwyn up so."

Hank was silent.

"They said they had brought in Selwyn wounded, when at that very minute he was lying in my Place, dead."

"It wasn't at my request that they brought me to your door."

"No; you were feather-headed enough, just then. So you purpose going back upon all of us? Oh, well, I haven't kept you very fully informed. Listen, and maybe you'll change your mind. Three days ago a band of men went out to hunt stage-robbers, with Connolley and his Regulators at their head. They came back about dusk of the next day. Connolley halted them just outside the town; made them a speech; said that there were traitors among them, and that, but for his superior wisdom, they would all have been led into ambush and slaughtered. Then he pronounced the Regulators disbanded; he washed his hands of them."

"Mack, are you lying to me?"

"I wish I could say yes. No, I'm not lying; and that isn't the worst. The next day Pete Finlayson's body was found hanging to a cross-beam, on the spot where Connolley harangued the Regulators the night before."

Cool Hank sat silent, his face pale again, his eyes looking Mack through and through.

"You see," said Mack, after a pause, "that this is a bad time to go back on your friends. It will look like an effort to save yourself, and even that won't work. A week ago you might have been accused of murder almost without danger to yourself; you've always been popular, and that would have carried you through. But things are changed. The town's full of threatenings. There's trouble in the air. There's a strong feeling growing against the old order of things. There's a secret influence at work. There's mysterious talk of another robber hunt, with new leaders and with the military to back them. I tell you, things look black for some of us. And

here you sit cursing me, when I verily believe that if I hadn't made an effort to screen you, by trying to make out a case against somebody else, all this hubbub would not have been kicked up. It's that infernal Dalton business that's done it."

Mack stops and waits for his effect. But Cool Hank has himself under perfect control again.

"Well," he says, "go on. Since you have gone into details, finish. How did you try to screen me? who is the 'somebody else' upon whom you attemped to throw the blame? what do you mean by the Dalton business?"

"I'll tell you all about the inquest," says Mack, "and then you'll understand."

And he does tell him, omitting some particulars, here and there, but giving, so far as Dalton's share in the trial is concerned, a very faithful version.

The listener just over their heads makes a mental note of the fact that he does not mention, however remotely, the part taken by Mountain Mag and Barbara Wray: that he does not even name these two young ladies.

When Mack has gone over the entire ground, giving sharp emphasis to the strong points made against Dalton, and ending with a rehearsal of Doctor Mitchell's final summing-up, and the verdict of the Coroner's jury, his auditor sits, looking him full in the face, in severe silence for some moments. At last he speaks.

"So," he says, "you cursed coward! You contemptible sneak! You have woven a coil of evidence against this man Dalton, because you hate and fear him. And you ask me to believe that it was to serve me that you did it——you liar!"

"I tell you there was nothing false about the evidence. I pushed the search for it, and pushed the prosecution all I

could, but the *evidence* is square enough." Mack seems to have lost all feeling of personal resentment in the effort he is making to impress the facts upon Cool Hank.

"It seems, then," says Cool Hank slowly,—"that is, if you have told the truth—it seems that Mr. Dalton and I divide the honor of this accusation between us about equally?"

"You *did*."

"Oh, did; and why not *do?*"

"Because Dalton has redeemed himself by standing his ground and by offering that reward. The fact that you have been in hiding, as people think, has made prejudice against you."

Mack looks at him warily as he speaks. He knows that he is treading upon dangerous ground; that he may be saying at any moment the word that will act as the last straw.

But Cool Hank is still worthy of his name.

"Mack," he says, "you're almost a *perfect* villain. You're grand in your specialty, and you're a wonderful liar! As if I did not know how you have been killing two birds with one stone! You hate that man Dalton, and you fear him. You have done your level best to ruin him, and you expect to make capital of your revenge and spite by turning it to my account. Drop that. If you have set the dogs on Dalton, *I* know why you did it!"

"Why!" stammers Mack. It is not a question, but Cool Hank chooses to receive it as such.

"Perhaps it never became known to all Caledonia that you were once collared and kicked by this same Dalton. Do you want your memory refreshed? It was quite early, and Selwyn and I were the only witnesses, except the girl. She had fallen sick, I think she said, while drudging behind your

greasy foot-lights; and, because she had disappointed you, you withheld her wages. Dalton found her crying where you had turned her out. He led the girl in with one hand, and took you by the throat with the other—ah, I see that you are beginning to remember it. Selwyn and I could not interfere; we didn't want to. I believe we both told you then that he served you right. Now that I recall it, this was Selwyn's first meeting with Dalton. He privately expressed himself as not quite pleased to find his old school-fellow here in the wilderness."

"Since you remember so much, perhaps you recollect that Selwyn said he thought Dalton was interested in the Overland?"

"Yes; I remember that, too. And you took the alarm. You thought Dalton might look too closely after his interests. Don't you know that Selwyn always manipulated you through your fears? I didn't believe a word of that then; I don't now. But I can see how eagerly you caught at a chance to hurt Dalton. So my absence has not been in my favor, eh? Well, I'll try now what my presence can do. I'll go and take up my quarters at the St. Charles, and have an understanding with Dalton."

Mack starts and catches his breath.

"But," he stammers, "but you can't—it won't do—the boys—I promised—pshaw! Hank, you'd be arrested in ten minutes!"

"That's my affair."

"No, it isn't; there's too much at stake!"

"Bah! there's nothing at stake. Mack, I'd like to know how much longer you think I'm going to stay in this confounded hole."

"Well"—Mack rubs his hands and half shuts his eyes—"well, a little while yet; until we understand each other better, or your arm gets well."

"By which you intimate that I am a prisoner here *your* prisoner, because, until my arm gets well, I can't break your head and your locks, and scale your palisades, eh? Well, until that time I intend to be monarch of all I survey. Be so good as to take yourself off, Mack. I want to reflect upon these things, these probable lies, that you have told me."

All Mack's serenity deserts him. He springs up and deals the table a fierce blow.

"Hank," he cries, "we've *got to come to terms to-night!* We must *succeed* or be *ruined!*"

He bends toward Cool Hank, who sits perfectly unmoved, until their faces are close together, and says a few words in a sharp hissing whisper. Then he recoils suddenly. Cool Hank has bounded up, his eyes and cheeks aflame. Not a sound escapes his lips until he has seized the man before him, shaken him with his strong, uninjured hand as a dog might shake a rat, and flung him violently from him.

"Mack!" he cries hoarsely, "go, while you can! If you stay, I shall kill you! If Duke Selwyn were not dead I would kill *him;* yes, if he had a dozen lives! Go and denounce me; say that I killed Selwyn, that I have confessed it; say anything, but go, *go!*"

He turned sharply and walked to the low bed, as if to remove himself, by even that much space, from an overmastering temptation.

Mack, who has been gathering his shaken anatomy from the floor where he has been flung, seizes this moment while Hank's back is turned, as if it were his last of grace. He is near the

door; he springs toward it, and in a moment is on the other side and safe.

Cool Hank hears his movement, hears the door open and shut, without moving. He stands like a statue there beside the bed for a long minute, then flings up his hand in a gesture that may mean rage, menace, or remorse.

"Curse them!" he says between his teeth; "curse them all!"

He goes to the door, tries it and finds that it is locked on the outside.

"Of course," he says grimly. "I didn't frighten him into forgetting *that!*" He turns, and going back to the table, bows his head and seems to think. Then he looks up, and his pale strong face is distorted with anguish.

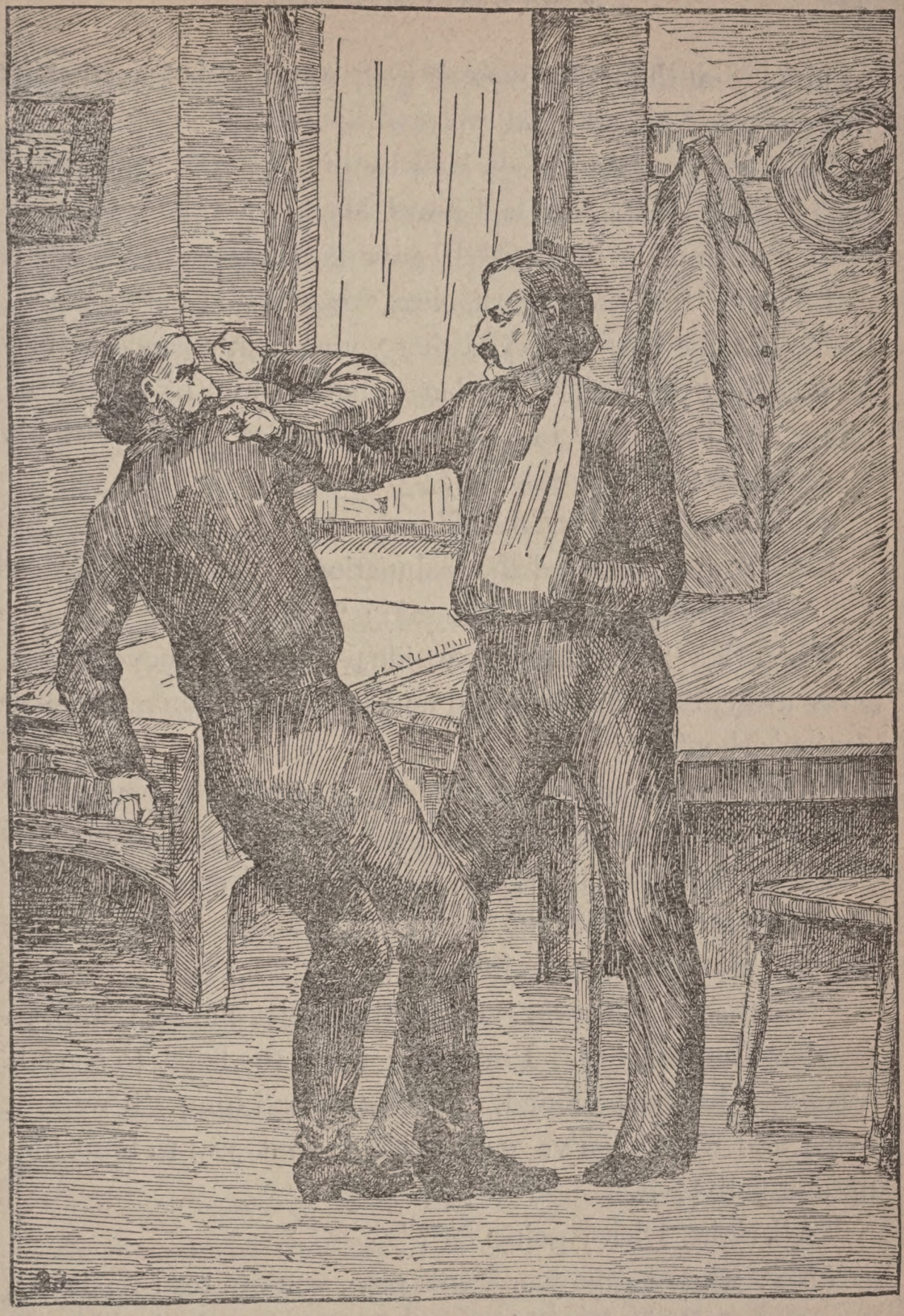
"If I could know the *truth!* If I could be *sure* that he didn't lie to me!" he cries. Then he flings out his hand again. "Oh, I'd give half my life to see Mag to-night, for only five minutes! *She* would not lie to me, and she would *believe* me!"

The uplifted hand falls to his side; he goes slowly across the room, and throws himself face downward upon the bed.

CHAPTER LXVI.

A WORD TO THE WISE.

When Cool Hank, in one of the darkest moods and hours of all his life, turned away from the table to fling himself upon his couch, and so passed out of Stanhope's sight, that young man sat erect for a moment, and might have been a statue or



He has seized the man before him, shaken him with his strong uninjured hand.—Page 409.

a chimney on the roof, so moveless he was. A daring thought had come to him, and had captured his fancy.

"I'm going to do it!" he said to himself, and straightway began his descent. He had heard Mack cross the yard, and open and shut the door which gave him access to his office, and he knew that the way was clear, when he slid to the ground beside Charlie Carson. And that young gentleman, who had been cooling his heels for what seemed to him like half the night, could not deny himself the pleasure of saying, with his mouth close to Stanhope's ear:

"I hope you didn't *hurry?*"

But Stanhope ignored the insinuation.

"Over, Charlie," was all he said; "quick."

When they had scaled the outside palings, and moved a few paces away, Stanhope stopped and put a hand upon his companion's shoulder.

"Charlie," he whispered, "I can't stop for explanations. Do you know where to get me a good pair of horses, saddled?"

"Yes," said Charlie, after a moment's reflection.

"How long will it take?"

"Ten minutes; maybe fifteen."

"Get them right away, and tie them—let me see; well, as near here as you can. I'm going up to the hotel to consult Vernet, if he's to be found. If I don't find him, I'll write a note; and when you've got me off, I want you to hunt him up and deliver it."

"All right, Dick; going far?"

"No; when I give you Van's note, you can read it; it will save time. Be in Mack's saloon after you get the horses, and keep your eye out for Mack. That's all."

That was all. Stanhope was off with the last word on his lips,

and Charlie tarried only long enough to wind himself up in the rope ladder. Then he too was off, but in an opposite direction.

Half an hour later, they were again scaling the palings as before. When Stanhope began to mount the second time, Charlie gave him a light upward push.

"Good luck, old man," he whispered.

Cool Hank Dutton, quite destitute of his "coolness," was still lying upon his bed when he heard a soft sound at his door. He turned his head and listened a moment, and in that moment the door swung inward, and a good-looking, well-dressed, smiling young man stepped briskly across the threshold.

"Good evening, Mr. Dutton," he said, and closed the door. "I've come to invite you to take a little ride with me. Do you feel equal to a few miles in the saddle?"

Cool Hank raised himself on his elbow and stared at the intruder.

"How did you get *here?*" he asked dazedly.

"Easily: scaled the palings with a rope ladder, and opened your door with a skeleton key. Mack keeps things pretty snug here, but I'm rather fond of explorations. Besides, I've had an eye upon you ever since you came here, Mr. Dutton, and I've been not a little interested in you. I don't feel like spending much time now, so I may as well tell you that I have heard all that passed between you and Mack to-night and come prepared to—"

Cool Hank sprang from the bed with an exclamation that broke in upon his sentence.

"If you heard," he cried, "you can answer me! Did he tell the truth?"

"About Selwyn and Dalton, do you mean?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, Mack really kept very close to the truth—for him."

Cool Hank suddenly became calm, quite like himself.

'Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm called Dick Carson, by Caledonians. I'm a friend to Philip Dalton and Doctor Mitchell. I happened to discover that a man was in hiding here and have been sort of playing special providence, looking down upon you by night."

Cool Hank involuntarily glanced upward.

"Yes," laughed Stanhope, "you've hit it. I've been on top of this secret chamber of yours; got a first-class observatory up there. Now, I gathered the idea to-night that Mack wants to keep you *perdu*, and that you don't want to be kept. I've heard enough of Cool Hank Dutton to know that, whatever else he is, he is a man of his word, and I've come to make a proposition to you."

"What is it," asked Cool Hank, coming close to him.

"I will take you now, to-night, to Margaret Drood's ranch, if you will give me your word of honor to return with me to Caledonia; to come back and remain in hiding here or otherwise as I desire, for, say, two weeks."

Cool Hank's eyes were searching his face, but instead of answering he asked:

"Do you know Margaret Drood?"

"Yes; I met her at the inquest."

"At the inquest! Mack didn't name *her!*"

"Well, he *did* omit some particulars. Are you going to accept my proposition?"

Hank considered a moment.

"Let's understand each other," he said finally. "Am I to go as your prisoner?"

"By no means. I shouldn't know what to do with you."

"Will you tell me your exact position?"

"Well, I'll tell you this much: I have no thought of the Selwyn business. I don't want to earn that reward. But I want to see Dalton clear of that charge. If you'll go, as you said to Mack, and stay at the St. Charles until the thing is settled, I won't ask more."

"Look here," said Cool Hank, "will you accept my word?"

"Yes," said Stanhope promptly.

"Then listen. If you'll take me or let me go to Margaret Drood, now, to-night, and permit me to talk with her alone, I pledge you my life to do as you wish. But if you can contrive to get me arrested for that murder, you'll do me the only other favor I'll ask of you."

"Well," ejaculated Stanhope, "you're getting too deep for me! But come along. I've got two good horses waiting outside. *I* mean fair play, Hank Dutton, and if *you* don't—"

As he checked himself, Dutton put out his hand.

"*I* mean fair play," he said, "and, if I don't, may I never find another friend in need."

Van Vernet, who supposed Stanhope and Carson to be fixtures at Mack's, for a part of the night at least, had joined Dan Strong in a tour of the town, to get, as Dan expressed it, the lay of the land, and it was more than an hour before Charlie succeeded in running them down. When Vernet had read the note which Charlie put into his hand, he looked up and stared across it.

"Charlie, do you know what that fellow has written here?"

"No," said Charlie quietly. "He told me I was to read it, but it was *sent* to you, so I thought—you first."

Vernet put the note into his hand, and Charlie read with astonished eyes the following:

DEAR OLD MAN:—

The chap in the S. C. is *Cool Hank Dutton.* Have just overheard an interview between him and Mack. Jump to this conclusion: that Mack and C. H. are both in league with the outlaws, and that either Mack or Selwyn are "*head centres.*" M. and C. H. are now at odds, and M. is actually keeping him a prisoner. I intend to take C. H. to Mountain Mag's ranch to-night. This is my idea: I think that C. H. knows something about Wray. The man isn't altogether bad. I mean to surprise him with Miss W. and her story, and hope to rouse the chivalry that is certainly in him. At any rate, I don't intend to let him get away from me. I wish you were with me, but know it wouldn't have worked. I think you'll see both of us at the St. Charles before morning. Meantime, ta-ta. A word to the wise, you know. DICK.

"What on earth does he mean?" ejaculated Charlie as he gave back the note; "a word to the wise!"

"The Lord only knows. This is the craziest thing Dick has done yet. 'A word to the wise!' I've a mind to pretend to think it means *follow,* and do it. How long since they left, Charlie?"

"An hour ago. Look here, Vernet, you've kept me on the outside of about everything, but if you go out to-night, *so do I.*"

CHAPTER LXVII.

MOUNTAIN MAG'S TROUBLE.

After Vernet and his friend had left them in the early afternoon, Mountain Mag became very busy, and through all

that she did ran a suppressed excitement that Barbara must have noticed, had she not been, herself, so preoccupied.

Mag's first movement was to visit old Mary in her kitchen; and the direct methods of the girl, and the old woman's habit of reliant and ready obedience and acquiesence in everything projected by her young benefactress, were exemplified in their brief interview.

"Mary," said Mag, after she had carefully closed the door, so that no sound of her voice might reach the sitting-room, where Barbara was pacing thoughtfully to and fro, "how would you like to go to town for a few days?"

Mary lifted her two dripping hands from the dish-pan and turned to face her young mistress.

"Who? me, Mag?"

"Yes; you and all of us. I won't fib to you, Mary; I know how well you can hold your tongue. It's on Miss Wray's account that I'm going, but I want her to think it's on business of my own. Can you cook up enough to feed Monckton for a few days and leave things handy for him?"

"Why, yes, of course, child, if you want *me* to go. Land alive, I hain't been in Caledonia time's when!"

"Well, I do want you, Mary. And be sure, if you say anything about it before Miss Wray, to blame the *business* for all of it. I wish we could go to-day, but we can't."

"Oh, land, no!"

"So we'll go in the morning. There needn't be anything said to Monckton, except that we're going. If he asks you—"

Mary tossed her head with a sniff that showed the state of her mind where Monckton was concerned.

"I'll send him about his business," she said, "if he comes quizzin' round *me*."

From the kitchen Mag went to the stables, where she found Monckton.

"Monck," she said, "I'm going to town to-morrow morning: there's a little business I've been wanting to look after for some time. Miss Wray is going with me, and Mary thinks she may as well go too and get a new dress. So, I guess, you'll have things pretty much your own way here. You may put the sorrel colts to the wagon after breakfast, and drive in with us."

"All right, Miss Mag," he answered. But when Mag was out of hearing, he added: "Something's up. She hadn't thought of this before them fellers come. Mag's gittin mighty high-handed." And Monckton scowled as he went back to his work.

Barbara had ceased to pace the floor, and was looking wistfully out upon the monotonous prairie, when Mag rejoined her. Both girls, for different reasons, found that any form of effort or exercise was easier than to keep still; and when Mag said, "We haven't done much riding yet, Miss Wray, how would you like a turn on horseback?" Barbara was glad of the proffered diversion, but she only said, over her shoulder:

"Thank you, Miss Drood; I don't want to ride with such a stiff, prim, formal young woman."

Mag laughed and came nearer. These two girls, so different in much that came by cultivation, so alike in nature's best gifts to woman, had grown to be very good friends

"Excuse me, Barbara," she said. "You see I have heard those two gentlemen 'Miss Wray' you until I have fallen in with them. Would you like a ride?"

"Yes," turning away from the window, "I would. I don't mind telling *you*, Mag, that I'm very restless."

"Well, a gallop's cured me of that feeling more than once. I'll tell Monck to get up the horses."

They rode about the prairie until it was almost sundown, talking at random, and each avoiding, for the time, the subject in which she was most interested.

As they turned toward home, Mag seemed to grow more and more silent and preoccupied. She had studied how she should contrive to take Barbara back to Caledonia without betraying to her the fact that she was being taken for her own good. In Mag's primitive life she had not learned that useful art so well known to most of her sex—the art of acting. Just how she should manage it had puzzled her a little, at first. But Mountain Mag was a woman, and having determined, for once, to enact a bit of deceit, she did it, like a woman, exceedingly well.

As they rode on, and Mag seemed to grow more pensive and preoccupied, Barbara, just as Mag had meant that she should, took note of her mood.

"Margaret," she said, "you are letting something make you anxious. I hope—"

"Oh, it's nothing," said Mag; "at least it's not much. Only a little business matter of my own that I've been rather neglecting of late."

"Oh!" cried Barbara quickly, "and on my account, too, I feel sure. Tell me about it, Mag; and *don't* neglect anything for me."

"It isn't worth bothering you about. Besides didn't you say that you had no head for business? It's about some stock I own, and some papers, and some debts due me—I don't owe anybody, thank goodness! I go into town and have these things straightened out for me once in a while, and I was thinking—"

"Margaret Drood," cried Barbara, turning upon her with mock firmness, "you deceitful girl! After all your promises, too! You've been wanting to go to Caledonia, and you wouldn't because you think I am such a goose as to dread remaining here without you."

"But," said Mag, secretly delighted with the success of her plan, "I should have to stay away several days—there's the trouble."

Barbara started, and her countenance fell. But after a moment she said bravely:

"Why, then, I must go too, of course. And I shan't mind it in the least, with you. That is, if I won't be in your way, over there."

"You wouldn't," declared Mag; "not the least bit. And we might take Mary; she likes to go down once or twice a year. It would just suit her, and you'd have her with you, if you liked, when I'm gone out."

"Margaret, I've a suspicion that you're taking Mary on my account."

"No indeed! She generally does go when I do."

"Well," said Barbara, "we can start as soon as you like. And don't let me hear of your neglecting your affairs again for mine, Mag."

"I won't. And if you're really willing to go, we may as well start in the morning."

When Mountain Mag led Miss Wray's horse around to the stable-door, Monckton was not there. Mag called for him, then led the horses in and stabled them herself. But there was a cloud upon her brow as she entered the kitchen and looked about her.

"Mary, where's Monck?" she asked.

"Margaret Drood, you deceitful girl! after all your promises, too!"
-Page 420.

"I don't know, child, except that he's gone off on his horse, with a chap that rode up here about an hour ago. I heard him tell Monck somethin' about a horse, and ask him to do somethin', I couldn't make out what. Then Monck came to the door, an' put his head in, an' says he was goin' to look at a horse that had been took sick on the prairie. He said he'd be back purty soon, he guessed."

Mag made no comment, but turned away with a troubled face. She did not speak of Monck's absence to Barbara. When it was almost dark, and still he had not returned, she went out and fed the horses, and saw that all was snug for the night, as she so well knew how to do. When she came back to the kitchen, she said to Mary:

"I guess I wouldn't say anything before Miss Wray about Monck's being gone. She may get frightened if she thinks there is no man in the house."

"All right," answered Mary. "But I guess Monck'll turn up soon; a bad penny—a bad penny!"

Mag put out her lantern, hung it on a nail behind the door and then washed her hands at the sink.

"What sort of a man was he, Mary?" she asked, as she wiped her hands on a roller towel.

"Was who?"

"The man that came after Monck."

"Oh! Why, big an' tanned. I never seen him before."

Mag sighed and went back to the sitting-room. Neither of the girls were inclined to sleep early, and both were, inwardly, more excited than they would willingly have acknowledged.

They talked of many things; of Mag's life among the mountains, and of Barbara's in the city.

"What I miss most now is schooling," said Mag finally.

"I miss it more than ever since I've had you here, and seen your dainty ways, and heard you talk."

"Why, Margaret! I've thought often that you conversed extremely well, and, if you'll excuse me for saying it, your manners are very good. Nature has taught you true politeness. Don't allude to *my* manners, please. I feel as artificial as a lay figure!"

Mag was silent a moment.

"Maybe it wouldn't be quite honest to let you think I've never had any hints," she said, flushing a little. "I have had a friend who helped me in a good many ways—by telling me how things were done in the world, and by correcting my blunders, after I'd begged him to, and by telling me the names of a few books that would help me. My poor father taught me all he knew—that seemed enough for him; just to read and write, and a little about figures. But it's only since I've begun to pick up a trifle more knowledge, that I can see how much there is that I ought to know."

"My dear child, I don't think there is anything that will seem very difficult to *you*, you are so eager and so able."

"Why!" exclaimed Mag, struck by some thought, "that's almost word for word what *he* said—" She stopped breathlessly, and dropped her eyes, the hot blood surging into her face.

Then, with one of those swift, indescribable, womanly gestures, that every gentle, generous, impulsive woman knows and uses in moments that have risen above and beyond the sway of the cold proprieties, Barbara Wray drew her low chair to Mag's side and took both her hands.

"Margaret Drood," she said, "there's something I *must* say! I've long wanted to, and now I shall. It isn't to gratify curiosity, or to be impertinent, but—oh! you big-hearted,

proud, reserved Mag, don't you suppose I *know?* I've heard about him from Doctor Mitchell, from Mr. Morgan, from everybody! And everybody speaks well of him—you heard what Doctor Mitchell said at that wretched inquest. And yet I can see that you're worrying your heart out about him. I've been wild to have you talk about him ever since—ever since you stood up there before the Coroner's jury and refused to speak one word that they might use to injure him. I wanted to tell you how grand I thought you, and I felt sure that he must be worthy, or you could not have given him your friendship. Why, in spite of all the evidence, I *know* Philip Dalton did not kill that man; and why should we not feel the same about *him?*"

No name had been mentioned, but to these two women this was no ambiguous "he." It was Cool Hank Dutton of whom they both had spoken, and both understood.

"Oh!" cried Mag, glad to speak, now that the way had been opened, "if he were only here; here as Mr. Dalton is! If I could ask him, I would know—the truth!"

"Margaret Drood," said Barbara, sitting erect and looking straight at Mag, "what kind of a daughter would I be if I said: Because my father it not here—because I do not know where he is, and he makes no sign—he is hiding from the consequences of some wrong he has done."

"Oh, I have thought of that," sighed Mag. "I have thought of everything, but—"

"'But'—well, now, but what? Don't you remember what the Coroner said about those jewels? *I* should cling to *that*, until I found something better."

"Oh," groaned Mag, "you don't know all! You can't understand what you are saying!"

"Well, I do know that Doctor Mitchell said that your friend, whatever else he might have done in a moment of anger, could not have taken those things—and they *were* taken."

Mag covered her face with her hands and rocked to and fro, moaning: "Oh! you don't know, you *don't* know!"

"Mag," entreated Barbara, "tell me the very worst. It will help you to bear it."

Mag suddenly let her hands fall and turned a pale face toward Barbara. "I *will*," she said, "and see what you will say to me *then*."

Barbara took one of her hands and waited silently.

"That day—the day of the murder—he was here. Selwyn had done something that had put him in a terrible rage. I couldn't make out what it was, and I never quite understood the intimacy between him and Selwyn. But this day he made a horrible threat, and I was not able to say anything to quiet him in the least. That night I got so uneasy that I couldn't rest. I felt as if some dreadful thing was going to happen. And then I began to think that if somebody could see Selwyn, and warn him, it would prevent trouble. I was in bed when this idea came to me, and all at once I jumped up and said to myself, '*I'll do it.*' It was late, then, and Monckton was away on one of his sprees. But I didn't care for that. I wasn't afraid. I saddled Nick, and set out for town. At the inquest I told them that I had started to look up Monckton, and that I was leading his horse, but that was a lie. I'd never have thought of hunting Monck if he'd stay away a year, and he knew it. I told them, to explain my riding into town so late, that Monck's horse got away from me and that I lost a lot of time trying to catch him. That was another lie, for, of course, I didn't lead his horse; and one of the jurors came

near tripping me by asking me what time the moon rose. I meant to get in just as they came out of the Theatre, but I missed it a little. I knew that Selwyn was hanging around that Miss Lorne, and so I said to myself, 'I'll ride toward the boarding-house, and if he's gone home with her, I may meet him yet.' That was why I rode so slow, and came up so readily with my lantern when Billy Piper called me. When I heard that one groan, I wonder I didn't scream. And when I went into the cellar, and saw Duke Selwyn lying there, I felt sure that *I* knew who killed him."

"Mag," said Barbara softly, "it *was* terrible! But—there was only circumstantial evidence—"

"Wait," interrupted Mag, "until you hear all. Billy Piper didn't give more than half a look; and so, when between us we had made those girls go away and Billy ran off to get help, I went into the cellar again, all alone, and looked at Selwyn, and his watch and rings and diamond pin *were all there.*"

"Oh, Mag!"

"I got down on my knees," continued Mag grimly, hardening her voice and hurrying over her words, "and I took off the rings, the watch, and the rest, for I felt sure it was the only way to turn suspicion from *him.* I knew no one would accuse him of taking *them.* I tied them up in a handkerchief, and, as soon as I could, I carried them out on the prairie, and threw them into the middle of a pond that was all soft mud at the bottom. Later, after the body had been carried to Mack's, I couldn't be easy till I went back and hunted around the cellar. I was afraid there might be something else that I ought to hide. I didn't find anything, though, except that pistol."

"Oh," interjected Barbara, "if it had not been for *that*, they would have had no case against Mr. Dalton."

"I'd have taken that, too," said Mag, "for, although I had never seen anything like it, I was in such a state of mind that I couldn't have made things sure enough, but I was spied upon and half frightened to death, though I tried hard not to show it. You remember that queer man they called Podunk?"

Barbara smiled. "Yes, indeed; I should think so."

"Well, *he* made his appearance from behind one of the mounds. He saw the pistol before I did, picked it up and showed it to me, as polite as you please. I had my lantern, and was about sure there was nothing more to be found, when I heard somebody say, 'Ye've jest missed it.' And then he came and took the lantern right out of my hand. He was grinning from ear to ear, as if he considered it a good joke. I've thought about that man a good deal, and sometimes he worries me. He said that he wasn't watching *me*, and that we were 'jint discoverers.' He asked me if I wanted to take the pistol to Mack's and said *he* didn't. I tried to be high-handed with him, but he seemed to know that I was only acting. He said I needn't be bothered about his saying anything concerning our meeting there, he was as much my friend as anybody's; and he'd 'keep it mum.' And so he did. But it's troubled me a good deal. There's something more than we understand about that man."

"It's certainly strange," mused Barbara. "Did you ever think that perhaps he knows a great deal more about the murder than has been told?"

"Oh, yes; I've thought and thought and thought. But *now* you can see, can't you, why I wouldn't answer the Cor-

oner's questions about Hank? and why I didn't get any consolation out of the argument about that jewelry?"

"Yes, Mag; I see," answered Barbara softly. "But you must not despair even now."

Mag turned upon her quickly.

"Would *you* encourage yourself to hope, if it were your own case?" she asked.

"Yes! If I ever had reason to believe in him, if I *ever* had faith in him, I'd cling to it to the last moment."

"God bless you!" said Mountain Mag. And she bent down and kissed the hand of her comforter.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

A SIEGE.

It was late when Barbara retired, and she soon fell asleep. But Mag remained awake and restless. Monckton did not return and old Mary had long since sought her labor-sweetened repose.

When Mag was satisfied that Barbara was sleeping, she went softly about the house, making sure that doors and windows were fastened, and occasionally she relieved her overburdened mind by addressing herself to the silence about her.

"If I live another week I'll have some tight board shutters to these windows. I don't know why one must be so careless," she muttered, as she shook the window-sash to be positive that it did not yield.

And, after a time, as she contemplated the lock of a door:

"I don't understand *why* I should feel so; Mr. Morgan only said that one might as well use caution. Pshaw! I'm getting to act like an old woman. Superstitious!"

And then she found herself, without intending it, standing before her "arsenal," contemplating the weapons, fingering them in an absent manner, and finally loading some of them, with an ineffectual air—all for her own private benefit—of not realizing what she was about.

When everything was done, Mag could find no further excuse to linger, but linger she did until a sound, which seemed to come from the direction of Mary's room, caused her to start and listen, and then to extinguish her lamp, and glide out into the kitchen.

"She shan't come down here and find me making a fool of myself," she muttered.

It was Mary coming kitchenward in the dark. The old woman was talking to herself, as she came; it was a habit with her, and often amused Mag.

"The mischief's in it," Mag heard her mutter. "Doors creakin' and things abangin'. I s'pose it's that Monck."

She entered the kitchen, and Mag, flattening herself against the wall that she passed, knew that she was crossing the room and going toward one of the uncurtained windows. For a moment there was silence, and then Mag heard Mary mutter:

"Yes, it's him, of course! I'll stop and let him in—good for nothing!" Another moment of silence, and then Mag heard: "Land o' goodness! if he aint brought that feller back here! Mortal man, what's the meanin' of it! there's another!"

Then the old woman felt a hand upon her arm, and before

she could utter a sound, Mag's voice said close to her ear:

"Hush, Mary!"

The night was clear and objects outside were distinctly visible. In the open space between the stables and the house, Mag could see three men, half way between the two buildings, and in evident consultation. Her heart went down like lead, but she whispered quite steadily in Mary's ear:

"It isn't Monck at all. Hush!"

For some moments the men consulted together, and the two women at the window watched silently. Then Mag whispered:

"Mary, get something, anything—those dark blankets will be best—and we will pin them up at these windows. Those men mustn't see inside. The other windows are covered."

It was one of Mary's frugalities not to have curtains at her kitchen windows. A kitchen needed all the sun it could get, she said; besides, it saved washing. So far as the kitchen was concerned, Mag had humored her whim, and now, for the first time, she regretted it.

It took them some moments to arrange the impromptu curtains, for they worked in the dark. When the task was done, Mag could see, by peeping out the side of the window, that one of the men had disappeared.

"Mary," she whispered, as she dropped the curtain from her hand, "I wish you knew how to shoot."

"Hoot!" returned the old woman, "I do."

"Why, Mary, I never knew—"

"Hoot!" said Mary again, "wasn't I a miner's wife ten years before ever I came to *you?* Look here, Mag, what does it mean, this?"

"I'm afraid it means danger—an attack. Watch those men while I go to Miss Wray. Are you afraid, Mary?"

"Who, me? Not a bit of it! *I* don't mind a skrimmage. Drat that Monck!" Mary was already connecting this nocturnal visit with Monckton's absence.

A light shake wakened Barbara, and while she was rousing herself enough to ask a question, Mag's voice said:

"Are you awake, Barbara?"

"Yes; what is it, Mag?"

"There are three strange men outside, Barbara—don't be frightened; perhaps they are only horse-thieves and won't trouble *us*. I thought I had better come and tell you. The house is well fastened, and Mary and I can both shoot, if worst comes."

"So can I," said Barbara in a low voice, slipping from the bed and beginning to dress in the dark.

Mag caught her breath with surprise. "Barbara," she said, "aren't you frightened?"

"No, Mag. But I'm quivering with excitement—feel." She put out a tremulous hand, found Mag's and touched it.

Mag waited until she was ready, and they went below hand in hand.

When Cool Hank Dutton and Dick Stanhope arrived within sight of Mag's house, a light shone out, for an instant, from what both knew to be one of the windows of the sitting-room.

It was at the moment when Mag pushed up a curtain, and stood with the lamp in her hand examining the fastening. When she had done, she had dropped the curtain again, and the light, as it appeared to them, went out.

"Strange," said Cool Hank, stopping his horse, Stanhope at once following his example. "They're up very late there; it's unusual—" He checked his speech, and would have

urged on his horse again, but Stanhope, who was close beside him, leaned over and laid a hand upon his arm.

"There's something that I didn't tell you," he said; "Miss Drood has a guest."

"A guest! Who?"

"A young lady, who came here from the East in search of her father; a Miss Barbara Wray. Her situation was so forlorn that Miss Drood's heart was touched, and she offered the poor girl a shelter."

"Good God!" exclaimed Cool Hank.

"Well, I must say," said Stanhope carelessly, "that for a fellow who has been nicknamed *Cool*, you're about the most excitable and exclamatory chap I ever saw."

"Hush; and come on," said Cool Hank. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Stanhope rode on, smiling to himself; *he* thought otherwise. He had purposely reserved the piece of information about Barbara Wray until the last moment, and now he was congratulating himself. He had evolved, while listening upon the roof of the "secret chamber," a theory which, if true, would make clear and simple all the mysterious sayings exchanged between Mack and Cool Hank. What he now said and did was with an eye single to the solution of the problem which Cool Hank presented, and the proving of his theory, if it were capable of proof.

Evidently Cool Hank had something to think of too, for he was silent as they rode forward. Their journey had been made slowly because Hank had found that a rapid pace caused severe pain to his injured arm. They were still some distance from the ranch, and twenty minutes had been consumed by their onward ride, when they were startled by a pistol-shot.

It was fired, evidently, from the house, and they were near enough to hear it followed by a succession of oaths.

"Gods!" whispered Cool Hank, "the house is attacked!" He slid from his horse while speaking. "Let's tie our horses together, and take the chances of their standing. Are you well armed?"

"Yes."

"Give me one of your pistols, then."

"Well, maybe it is not so serious a matter as it seems. If it is, you'll get the weapon. Come on."

They crept forward stealthily, and Cool Hank stifled his impatience, provoked by Stanhope's caution, when he saw how like an Indian on a still hunt the latter made his approach.

Several men, they could not tell the precise number, were grouped about the front door, where a parley was evidently going on. Stanhope and Hank approached near enough to hear their words.

"I tell you," said one, "we may as well do it. That girl ain't goin' to open no doors for us! An' I ain't goin' to stand none o' *her* shots, if I know it."

"And *I* tell you," said another voice, "it won't do to hurt Mountain Mag or her property if we can help it; she's got too many friends. If we can git the girl out—"

Cool Hank's arm closed upon Stanhope's arm

"We must get into the house," he whispered. "Let's try the rear door."

They crept through the rank grass until they were near the back of the house, and then again Hank whispered, "Stop." They halted and listened; then crept close to the corner of the house and peeped cautiously around it. Two men were standing near the kitchen-door. One of them was at that in-

stant lighting a match, and by its momentary glare the two examined the fastenings of the door. The light, for an instant, revealed their faces.

Suddenly Hank put his mouth to his companion's ear, and whispered;

"I'm going to try a trick. Give me the pistol, in case it fails." He pulled off his soft felt hat and threw it upon the ground. "Will you untie this sling?" he whispered again.

The two men at the door were conversing in low tones. Stanhope wonderingly unfastened the sling and assisted Hank to button his crippled hand in the breast of his coat. Then he gave him the pistol. Cool Hank dropped it into his side pocket, and again put his mouth close to Stanhope's ear.

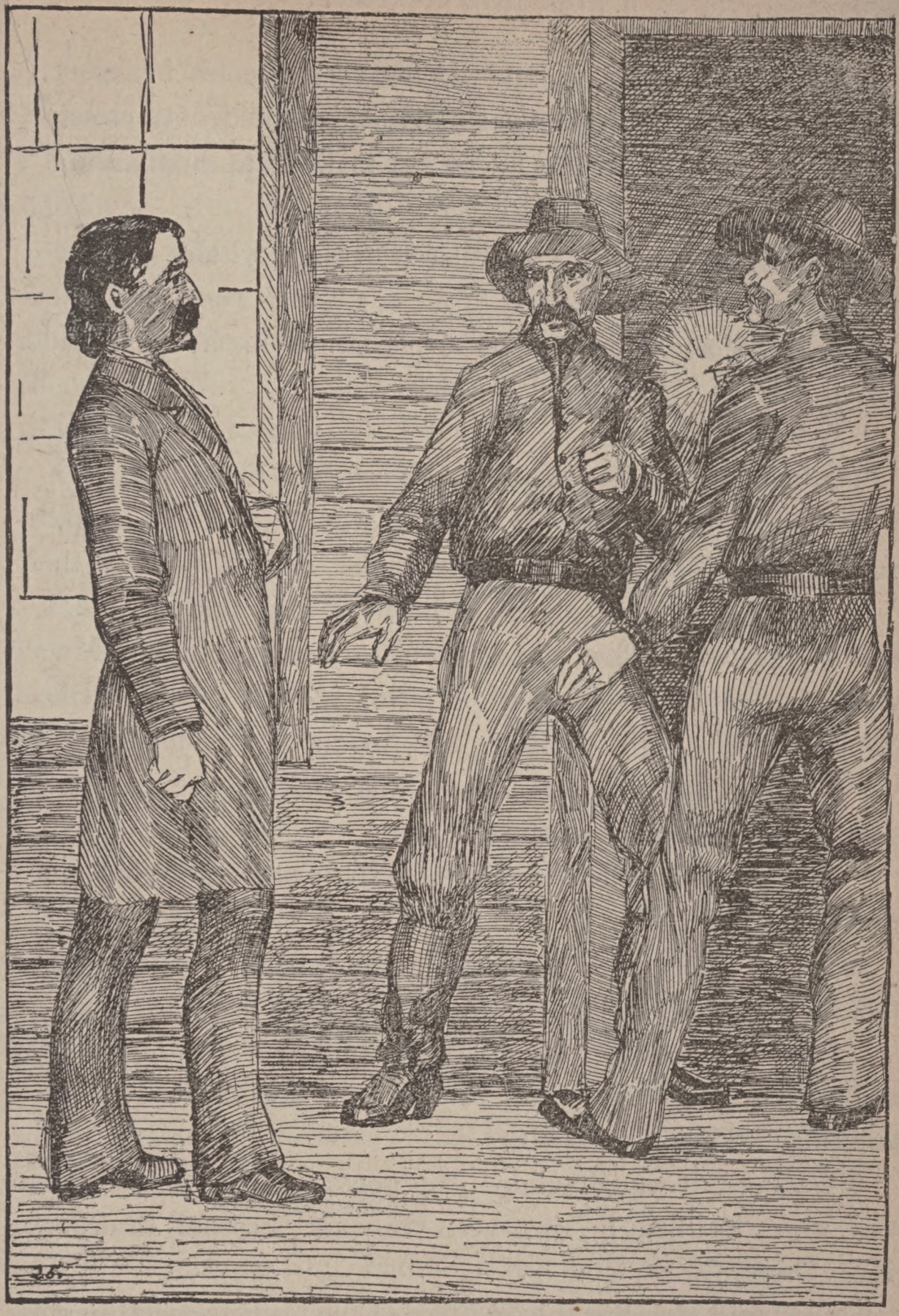
"I'm going to play ghost," he whispered. "If I don't succeed, we'll have to shoot. Watch me."

He waited until one of the men at the door struck another match, and then he advanced slowly and noiselessly. As the match blazed up, a slight sound, like a sigh, caused the two men to turn their heads. Cool Hank stood before them, upright, motionless, his head thrown back, his eyes fixed and staring; one hand was thrust in his breast, the other hung loosely at his side. Rigid enough, surely, he looked; but anything rather than ghost-like, so Stanhope thought. Evidently the men at the kitchen-door thought otherwise, for, after a single glance, they uttered a yell loud enough to startle the ghost himself, and ran wildly toward the stables.

Hank was back beside Stanhope instantly.

"Now," he said, "which way are they coming?"

A sound answered him. The yells of the frightened men had drawn the besiegers away from the front. They were coming around the house, on the north side.



After a single glance, they uttered a yell loud enough to startle the ghost himself.—Page 434.

"Come," said Hank, and dashed past the kitchen-door, around the house, to southward, and so to the front, closely followed by Stanhope, just as the last man disappeared around the opposite corner.

Instantly Cool Hank's mouth was at the keyhole.

"Mag," he called clearly.

Mag's voice, with a note of agitation in it, answered promptly:

"Who is it?"

"Cool Hank and a friend, to the rescue. Open, Mag."

Then they heard Mag say: "Barbara, quick—the lamp," and a light flashed up within the room. "Now, unbar the door," said Mag's voice. They heard a key turned, and a bolt withdrawn. Then the door opened, and Mountain Mag stood on the threshold, with a pistol in either hand. She stepped back at sight of them, and in another moment they were inside, and Dick Stanhope was making the entrance secure against further intruders.

"What is it?" asked Stanhope, as he turned. "What are they trying to do?"

Mag, who had not withdrawn her gaze from Cool Hank's face, seemed now, for the first time, to notice the questioner.

"Oh, Mr. Carson!" she ejaculated; and then added quickly, and with a side glance toward Barbara: "Trying to force an entrance. They are—robbers."

"Well,—" it was Stanhope who now assumed command—"we won't let them in, just yet. Is your 'arsenal' in order, Miss Drood?"

"Yes," said Mag breathlessly; "we have loaded everything!" And then she added: "There are ten men."

"There won't be so many if they stay long," said Stanhope.

"Mag," broke in Cool Hank, "you must give me something to cover my face. These fellows must not see me."

A scarlet flush dyed Mag's brow, and her eyes flashed upon her lover. But Stanhope spoke promptly:

"Here, if it's a disguise you want, I'll fix you." He drew from some inner pockets a fuzzy false beard and moustache, and shook them out with a quick snap. "There, let me put them on. Now, wear my hat. You're fixed. Better turn down that light again, Miss Wray."

Old Mary had entered from the kitchen. "They're all huddled together in a bunch out by the stables," she said. And then she saw the new-comers, and stopped and stared.

"Let's take a look at them, Mary," said Stanhope, and the two went out together. Mary led him across the dark room and up to one of the two windows, of which one was on either side of the door, and both, like the door, opening to the west.

Stanhope peeped out for a moment, and then whispered: "Isn't there another west window, Mary?"

"Yes; in the pantry."

"Can we open these windows, without too much noise?"

"Yes; they open pretty easy." Then she started at a sudden recollection. "Why, the pantry window *is* open at the top!"

Instantly Stanhope began to move toward the pantry-door, which he fancied he could see on the side of the room nearest him.

"That's it," said Mary.

A few moments later, Stanhope reëntered the sitting-room, where Cool Hank, Mag and Barbara stood, one at the door and one near each window, in watchful attitudes. He beckoned them, and they came toward him.

"I've been listening at the pantry-window," he said. "They're going to try moral suasion once more. If that fails, they're going to batter the kitchen-door in, if we don't stop them."

"We'll *stop* them," said Mag grimly.

"Miss Drood," said Stanhope, "if we can drive away these men without bloodshed, it will be best, believe me."

"Oh, yes, *yes!*" said Barbara quickly.

"You know," continued the young detective, smiling a little, "if we kill them, Dutton and I might have to bury them; and if any one is wounded, you'd have to take him in and nurse him. I think we can drive them away."

"Well," said Mag, "if you *can*. But I'll take my share in the burying if we shoot every one of them. What shall we do?"

"Take all the guns into the kitchen, and when they come to the front door to parley, you and Mary open the kitchen-windows; without noise, if you can."

A few moments later, a loud knock sounded on the front door. The prompt "Who's there?" that was uttered in an unmistakably manly voice, seemed, for a moment, to have caused consternation in the midst of the enemy. There was no reply to the question, and Stanhope, with his ear to the key-hole, could hear them whispering eagerly. Presently the besiegers seemed to understand each other, and one of them knocked a second time.

"Who's there?" Stanhope called again.

"Friends. Is that you, Monckton?"

"No; it isn't Monckton," replied Stanhope sharply. And then, loud enough to be heard by those who, he knew, were pressing close up against the door without, but yet in a milder

tone, as if addressing some one in the room, he said: "Miss Drood, I must insist that you let me and my men deal with these fellows. We were sent here for that purpose."

There was silence outside for a moment, and then:

"Who the dickens are *you?*" demanded the same voice outside.

"Lieutenant Baker is my name," answered Stanhope promptly. "You don't want to be introduced to all of my men, do you?"

Again there was a whispered consultation, and then the impatient spokesman said:

"What brought Lieutenant Baker and *all his men* to this ranch?"

"We came chiefly on *your* account," replied Stanhope coolly.

"Bah! We don't believe you've got any men in there!"

"If you stay about here much longer, we'll convince you that you're out in that opinion."

"We mean to come in," broke in another and sterner voice. "You'd better open the door."

"*Come* in, then," retorted the self-commissioned Lieutenant. "We'll give you a warm welcome!"

For some moments longer the men hung about the door, giving it an occasional shake, and making further attempts to parley, but no voice answered them. Stanhope was in the kitchen, arranging his defences.

Perhaps the ghost, or the fear of its possible reappearance, had prevented the men from wishing to stand guard again at the kitchen-door. At any rate, all the beseiging party had gone in a body to the front; and Mag and Mary found no difficulty in opening the windows. By the time the besiegers,

now bent upon making a forcible entrance, had selected from a pile of timbers, intended for use in building, one heavy enough to serve their purpose as a battering-ram, the besieged were ready for the onset. At the pantry-window was Stanhope, with a gun resting upon the sill, and at one of the kitchen-windows crouched Mag, similarly armed, while Mary, close beside her, gripped a long pistol in each hand.

"I'm handy with both fists," she had said. "Give me two."

At the third and last window was Cool Hank, also armed with a pistol. Much against her inclination, Barbara Wray had been sent to the rear.

Each figure crouched low beside its window; the muzzle of each weapon rested obliquely upon the window-ledge.

The besiegers have selected their battering-ram, brought it into place, and raised it.

"Now," said their leader, "bring it ahead a few steps more. Then a rush and it's done."

One, two, three paces they bring it forward. It is directly in a line with that luckless kitchen-door.

"All ready?" says the leader.

And then another voice rings out: "All ready?" A moment of statue-like silence within and without. "*Fire!*"

A blaze and a roar; bullets whizzing over the heads of the besiegers, now thoroughly demoralized.

"That was a warning!" cries the voice of Stanhope.

His words are drowned in another volley of shots; this time they come from the enraged enemy, and they rattle about the cottage and whistle in at the windows.

"Now," cries the leader again, "forward with the ram, boys, and we've got her!"

Again, for an instant, it is silent without. Then a mighty yell breaks the stillness, and following it the sound of galloping horses. At the same moment two pistol-shots from the cottage cut their way among the men outside.

Another yell, that mingles with the howls of wounded men, and the galloping horses are very near. Then the beam tumbles to the ground, and, in a moment, the last of the besiegers is disappearing behind the stables, leaving a trail of blood as he goes.

CHAPTER LXIX.

RESCUE.

"I'd like to know what they thought," said Stanhope, afterward, relating the story of the siege and rescue to Doctor Mitchell. "I suppose they must have imagined it was another regiment. How two such men as Vernet and Carson could have let off such horse-power yells, I can't see yet. I supposed it was all Caledonia. It wasn't a very pleasant position, though, for any of us. Leaving the outlaws out of the question, there was Van and Charlie Carson, with their led horses, tearing around the house. They didn't know whether to follow those fellows, or look for us. And when he called us—well, I *didn't* answer promptly. I didn't quite know what had happened. I had heard some one fall, out in the kitchen, and I was suffering, at that minute, from actual horror, fearing that it might be one of the women. After all, it was Miss Wray who brought us into port."

In this wise it had come about:

Unable to remain inactive after the receipt of Stanhope's note, Van Vernet had determined to ride to the ranch; and Charlie Carson was not to be left behind. They had started late, but had ridden rapidly, and so arrived in less than half an hour after Cool Hank and Stanhope had left their horses to take care of themselves on the open prairie. These quadrupeds had turned their heads homewards, and were aimlessly rambling, feasting as they went, when Vernet and Charlie came upon them; and, being on the lookout for Stanhope and Cool Hank, the two were not slow in surmising that these might be the horses they had ridden. Filled with fear lest their friend had fallen into some ambush, they had taken possession of the horses, and hurried forward to the ranch, arriving just in time to hear the first volley, to see that it was fired from the house, and to charge down, cheering, with their four galloping horses, to the rescue.

It was then that Vernet, puzzled between the silence and darkness within, and the fleeing outlaws without, called sharply:

"Dick—Mag—" and then last and most thrillingly—"*Barbara!*"

And it was Barbara who was first to answer from the darkness within: "Here! oh! here!"

It was Barbara too, who, a moment later, opened the kitchen-door, just as old Mary struck a light, which flashed up, illuminating a weird scene.

In the door-way, Van Vernet, grasping both Barbara's hands and saying something incoherent, while Charlie Carson peered anxiously over his shoulder. Stanhope, half-way across the kitchen, paused, staring at the opposite side of the room, where Cool Hank Dutton lay by the window which he

had guarded, with blood flowing from his shoulder, and Mountain Mag kneeling at his side. To care for him was their first thought, but when they pressed forward, Mag said huskily:

"Leave him; leave him to Mary and me."

"And to me," said Barbara bravely.

Cool Hank stirred and opened his eyes.

"It's nothing," he whispered, looking at no one but Mag. "Tell them to see that those villains—" He closed his eyes, fainting again from loss of blood.

Stanhope was out of the house in a moment, and Vernet, waiting only to be sure that Cool Hank was indeed in good hands, and that he could do nothing there, followed him.

The outlaws were already galloping across the prairie westward.

When Stanhope and Vernet reëntered the kitchen, Mag had cut away the clothing from Cool Hank's shoulder. It was only a flesh wound after all. The bullet had passed between the arm and body, drawing much blood but inflicting no serious injury. It was the crippled arm that had received the shot.

While Mag was staunching the blood, Mary preparing bandages, and Barbara hovering near them, eager to do what she could, Vernet, Stanhope and Carson conversed in low tones.

"How did this happen?" asked Vernet.

"I don't know," replied Stanhope, "the mĕn were here when we came."

And he related what had taken place, as he knew it, after which Vernet told how he and Charlie had found the two horses wandering at will, and taken possession of them.

"Well," said Charlie, "those horses are entitled to their share of credit. I guess they created the impression, in the minds of those fellows, of a whole mounted brigade."

"I've heard that three or four cowboys, riding about a house on a dark night and yelling at the top of their lungs, have been taken for a formidable troop of Indians on the war-path," said Vernet. "I can see, now, that it might easily be!"

"Do you think the outlaws will come back?" asked Charlie.

"No," said Stanhope, "I don't; but we'll be on our guard."

"What was their purpose, Dick?"

Stanhope cast a rapid glance around him.

"Wait," he said; "let's go into the sitting-room. We will light the lamps, and reload the guns, in case they do return. Our best plan now is to create the impression of strong reinforcements and perfect security. I'll close the windows and fasten up the curtains again."

This was soon done and then they went into the sitting-room.

"You asked my opinion of this business," said Stanhope. "I'll tell you. I think they were after Miss Wray. And if they were, it's proof positive, to me, that Mr. Wray is alive and in their hands. They hoped to get possession of his daughter, and then practise upon his fears."

"Curse them!" said Vernet; "I wish you had shot them all."

"We were too weak to begin actual bloodshed. Besides it would have been terrible for Miss Wray. She begged us not to kill. Our plan was to fire together, over their heads, as they were about to rush upon the door. If the first round

failed to drive them back, we meant to fire the second straight into them. I anticipated that they would return our volley, and thought if we could get them to empty their weapons it would be so much the better, it case we had to fire the second time. The word was given to shoot and then drop to the floor. I don't see how they happened to hit Dutton."

"I guess Hank didn't *drop*," said a voice from the door. They turned to see Mary entering. She closed the door and came toward them. "I had my cut at them," she continued, "and I'm glad of it."

"Was it you who fired those two last pistol-shots?" asked Stanhope.

"Yes. I guess I gave 'em as good as they sent Hank, anyway, if they didn't any of 'em stay behind."

"I guess you did, too, Mary," said Stanhope, not thinking it worth while, then, to comment further upon her pistol-practice; "you drew blood. How is Dutton?"

"Oh, he'll come out all right. Some of you'd better try and get Miss Wray away. She's been so wrought up she ain't thought about herself yet, but she's beginnin' to look pale, an' she can't git quieted down too soon. We're goin' to put Hank in my room, 'cause it's handier for him than Monck's. He's purty weak, and'll be willin' to lay quiet a little while, I reckon."

Vernet started and turned to the door. "I'll go," he said, and then hesitated.

"Well, go, Van," said Stanhope. "Bring her in here; it will be better for her just now. She'll calm down quicker if she's among us all."

Vernet followed Mary from the room, and came back in a moment with Barbara. She was very pale, and a strangely

confused look was creeping over her face. She glanced about her, at the lamp burning upon a small table, and at Stanhope and Charlie Carson.

Then she lifted her eyes to Vernet's face, opened her lips to speak, and fell forward upon the floor, the words dying in an inarticulate murmur.

When she opened her eyes, some moments later, she was lying upon a low couch, and Mary was kneeling beside her. The three young men had retreated to the kitchen.

"There," said Mary cheerfully, "I knew you'd soon be all right! I told 'em so. I said you wasn't one to be faintin' and botherin' folks for long." Mary had grown fond of Barbara and, if rough, she was practical. She knew how best to rouse the girl. "What with Mag a takin' care of *him*, an' only me to look after three gentlemen, and git 'em something to eat after their long ride and all the rest, I *should* be bothered if you'd give up. But you won't, will you, dearie?"

"No," said Barbara, smiling at the old woman's artfulness, "I won't, Mary; I'm ashamed of myself."

"You needn't be, then," said Mary crisply. "Most anybody'd faint after what you've been through—only it's all over, and there ain't any use to worry now."

"Well, I won't, then, Mary; I'll help you get supper instead."

But Mary would not hear of this. She went to the kitchen and said to Vernet and the others:

"I guess you'd best go back and talk with her now. I'm goin' to give ye all a bite of something."

"Thank you, Mary," said Stanhope; "it would be very acceptable. Charlie, you and I will see about those horses; they're loose in the enclosure, with their saddles on."

"Dick," said Vernet quickly, "*you* did that. I had forgotten about the horses."

Stanhope laughed, and went toward Mary, who was already lighting Mag's lantern for him.

"Well," he said, "I thought they might not like to wait for us, if left to their own sweet wills. Besides, you and Charlie had just done a like favor for Dutton and me. Better go back to Miss Wray, Van. Come along, Charlie."

When Vernet reëntered the sitting-room, Barbara sat erect upon the side of the couch, thinking—not of the outlaws, nor of her terror, but of the voice that had come ringing to her through the danger and darkness, calling her, for the first time, *Barbara.*

He came toward her, flushing a little and saying only:

"I am more than thankful that we reached here as we did, Miss Wray. I don't understand the whole affair yet."

"Oh, my friend, you are trying not to alarm me; but it has all come to me in a flash. *I* am the cause of this danger and trouble; I am sure of it. Those men asked Margaret *if I was here!*"

"Did they? Are you sure?"

"Yes. They first asked for Monckton; and next they asked her to open the door, and let one of them come in and talk with me. Mag refused, and then they began to threaten. Mr. Vernet, do you think—tell me, *do* you think they wanted to make me a prisoner?"

"Miss Wray," replied Vernet gravely, "it is very probable."

"But why, *why?*"

"I can see but one reason. If they are holding your father for ransom, and if he has refused to pay for his liberty—don't you see?"

"Oh, yes, yes! And I believe it is true; I am sure it is true!"

"Then, Miss Wray, you have every cause to hope. If they are hiding your father up there in the mountains, we shall find him."

"Oh!" she cried, "and I shall owe it all to you!"

"I wish, with all my heart, that were the case. But it is not, Miss Wray. You owe it as much—more, indeed—to others: to the two Carsons, and Connolley, and—but there, I am betraying my confederates."

When Stanhope came in he found Mag waiting for him in the kitchen.

"He wants to see you," she said, nodding toward the room where Cool Hank lay; and when she had seen Stanhope enter there, and close the door, she went into the sitting-room and sat down beside Barbara. She was pale, paler than Barbara now, and her face looked very fixed and stern.

"Well," Stanhope said, as he seated himself upon the edge of the bed where Cool Hank lay, "how is it? Are you going to need Mitchell again?"

A look of surprise crossed Cool Hank's face, but he ignored the question and asked:

"Have you told them—Carson, and the other?"

"Do you mean, have I told them about our romantic meeting and mutual contract?"

"Yes."

"Well, no; I haven't found an opportunity yet. But I shall tell them," he went on hurriedly, "for they know so much already; remember, Charlie was with me, and—"

"I'm willing you should tell *them* everything. I want

you to tell Mag, too. But not the others, at least not the young lady, yet."

Stanhope looked his surprise.

"Do you want me to tell Miss Drood how long you have been at Mack's wounded, and—"

"Yes, yes; tell her everything that you can. She has a right to know where I've been and *I* can't tell her."

"Oh!" ejaculated Stanhope, "oh ho!"

"I wish," went on Cool Hank, ignoring these ejaculations, "that you'd tell her as soon as you can. I want her to know it before—before—"

"I see," broke in Stanhope brightly. "After she hears that, you want to add something else which you're not bound to keep to yourself."

"What do you mean?" asked Cool Hank averting his eyes.

"I mean that I'm beginning to understand you. I'm 'getting hot,' as they say in hide-and-go-seek. You're bound to something or somebody by a promise; you can't give away anything that concerns others as much as it does yourself."

"Take care," said Cool Hank slowly: "don't get ideas that may make us bad friends. At any rate, don't talk them. I'm beginning to like you, and I want to prove it, but—"

"But I mustn't overreach, eh? Well, I won't. I'll tell Miss Drood all that I can about *you* without saying too much about myself. This business has been a little hard upon you. You came especially to see *her* and you haven't made much headway yet. Do you know that you're a regular elephant upon my hands just now."

"How?"

"Why, I can't help considering you in some sort, my prisoner, after all."

"I suppose not."

"And I didn't know who to appoint as my deputy. How would you like to have me put you in Miss Drood's hands?"

"I'm not sure she would take me," said Cool Hank gloomily.

"Oh, she will,—to oblige *me*." Stanhope's eye twinkled as he watched the other's face. "The question is, would she turn you over to me again on demand? I must ask her. Seriously, now, will you stay here, or at the St. Charles, as Mag chooses, until I see you again?"

"Are you going away?"

"I'm going to Caledonia as soon as it's daylight, and so is Morgan. Charlie will remain, and come later with you and the ladies. You're not fit to go down yet, and Miss Wray needs rest. Will you keep your side of the contract?"

"Yes; you can depend upon me."

Stanhope was silent a moment. "What do you intend to do about Mack?" he asked finally.

"Nothing," said Cool Hank. "Mack won't get any explanations from me, until you say the word."

"I'll say the word in good time. Now, I'll go and have a talk with Miss Drood."

"Wait," said Cool Hank. "I said it would be a favor to have me arrested. I've changed my mind."

"That's very odd," said Stanhope, with a laugh. "However, I could not have thought of obliging you, anyhow, as matters stand. It might interfere with my present plans."

"What!" cried Hank, "have you a doubt of my guilt, after all you have heard and seen?"

"Well," answered Stanhope coolly, "the question now is not as to your guilt or innocence, but as to the effect your arrest would have on my plans."

For a moment, Hank was silent. Then he began hesitatingly, and with his face averted: "When you tell her, if she asks you—and she will ask you—what you think about me, will you say the best for me that you honestly can? Mag's the only friend I have in the world."

"Yes," said Stanhope, with grave sympathy, "I'll do that."

Just then Mary appeared before them with a bowl of some cooling, home-made draught in her hand.

"Here." she said, pushing past Stanhope with scant ceremony, "drink this; and then you go to sleep. I hain't no notion of having you fretting into a fever on *my* hands. It's coolin' and quietin'; drink it."

"Drink it," repeated Stanhope, who read rebellion in Cool Hank's face. "It'll be some time before I can talk with our friend, perhaps. If you can sleep, you'll get rid of the time, and wake up ready for business. Make him drink it, Mary." And he went out, leaving the patient in Mary's determined hands.

CHAPTER L.

MONCKTON'S GOOD-BYE.

It was a delicate task that Cool Hank had imposed on Stanhope, to tell Mountain Mag of her lover's position, as it appeared to him, without wounding her; to say enough to do Cool Hank justice, without raising false hopes, and not to say too much about himself.

"I'll get Van's opinion," he said, after some thinking; and at the first opportunity he did.

"Tell as much of the truth as is necessary to make your part in the transaction clear to her," said Vernet. "Mag is entitled to our entire confidence, and is to be unreservedly trusted. But to tell more than is absolutely necessary might not be a real kindness to her, standing as she does between this good-looking outlaw and ourselves."

"Then you think he *is* one of them?" queried Stanhope.

"Yes; I can't make what has happened fit into any other theory—can you?"

"No; honestly, I can't. I hope Mag won't cross-question me, that's all."

"She won't, if I know her. Her pride will interpose where Cool Hank is concerned, or else she'll be afraid of hearing something not to his credit."

"Upon my word," said Stanhope laughingly, "you're getting wonderfully learned in woman's ways, Van."

Vernet's prophecy proved true. Mountain Mag listened to Stanhope's recital in absolute silence, and made no comment upon what she heard. She asked only one question.

"Does he know that you are telling me this?"

"He requested me to tell you. He said you had a right to know."

"Thank you;" and she turned away.

Just as day was dawning, and Vernet and Stanhope were beginning their preparations for departure, some one came to the kitchen-door, opened it cautiously, and looked in.

Barbara had fallen asleep upon the couch in the sitting-room, and Mag, Mary and the others were in the kitchen.

Mary was first to discover him, and she called out sharply;

"Monckton! Hi, there! come in, man, and see if ye can look us in the eye."

The man's face, which had worn a look of apprehension, gradually cleared as he stared about the room. He came forward, and then they saw that he was pale and unkempt; that his clothing was damp and earth-stained, and that he moved like one exhausted.

"Monck!" exclaimed Mag, starting toward him, "where on earth have you been?"

The man looked weakly about, and Stannope hastily put a chair beside him. He sank upon it, and looked up at Mag.

"Mag, what, what has happened?"

"We've had a little skirmish, Monck," said Mag, beginning to think that he looked more like a victim than herself. "The house has been attacked, but you see we had help, and nobody is much hurt. What became of *you*, Monck?"

"I've been layin' out on the prairie all night, bound hand and foot. They cut me loose a while ago, and I've tramped back here, half dead with rheumatism, and t'other half with fright. I darsent look in here, hardly; I was afraid things might be worse."

"Land o' Goshen!" burst out Mary, "I guess *you'll* want a hot dose. Why"—turning, in the pantry-door, to appeal to the company—"the man must be starved!"

And Mary forgot her prejudices in preparing a hot drink, and setting forth sundry eatables, while Monckton told his story in the fewest possible words.

He had never before seen the man who came to him in the afternoon with the story of a sick horse. The stranger had said that he was leading a valuable animal into Caledonia, intending to sell it. He had been camping with a wagon train,

and one of the men was his enemy. He believed this man had poisoned his horse. The story appealed to Monckton, who was himself a horse fancier, and possessed of some veterinary skill. He set out with the stranger, and when he began to think that the way was growing long, and to question his guide, the fellow drew a pistol and compelled him to ride forward until they were some miles away from the ranch, when they came upon a party of men who had picketed their horses upon the open prairie, and were squatted upon the ground, waiting, as Monckton inferred from their conversation, for darkness to come down and cover their forward movements. They bound him without ceremony, and, when night came, rode away and left him on the ground alone. It was impossible to release himself, and his roars for help only came back to him in echoes. He lay all night, writhing in tortures bodily and mental, until, when it was almost morning, the band of men came galloping back, and one had turned out of the way to cut his bonds, and curse him, and then dart on again. His horse had been taken from him, probably for the use of one of the outlaws; and when he had refreshed himself somewhat, he breathed threats of vengeance.

After Monckton's return, Vernet delayed his going a little, and found opportunity to speak with Mag.

"I've been trying to study your man Monckton," he said. "He looks to me like a steady, courageous, determined fellow."

"He is," said Mag quickly. "Monck's nobody's enemy but his own. He's faithful to his friends, but he's got a jealous, soured temper, and that makes him unpopular. But he's served me well, and my father trusted him in everything."

She might have added that Monck's pet grievance was her friendship for Cool Hank Dutton, whom he looked upon as an

interloper whose visits to the ranch might well be dispensed with.

"Then you believe he is to be trusted?" asked Vernet.

"Yes, indeed! Monck is trustworthy."

"I have thought that, perhaps, in his present state of mind, it would suit him to join our expedition."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Mag; "and you couldn't have a better man."

"But your affairs—can you spare him?"

"Yes, yes! I'll send some one out from town; don't mind that."

"Well, if you approve, I will talk with him," said Vernet.

He talked with him to such good purpose that Monckton was soon eager for the war-path. Vernet congratulated himself upon having secured a strong ally, and, before they left the ranch, Monck understood the programme perfectly.

The return of Monckton relieved Charlie Carson from the necessity of remaining at the ranch, and so Stanhope, Vernet and Carson rode away a little after sunrise.

"Charlie," said Stanhope, when they were within sight of Caledonia, "you will have something to do, after all. Your duty will be to look after Miss Wray, and between that and keeping an eye upon Mack, you will not have much time to miss us. Besides, there's Hatch."

"What about Hatch?" asked Charlie.

"Well, you must keep an eye upon him, too. Mack gave him money to go East with, and I rather prevailed upon him not to go. Mack's badly put out at his staying. I've been supplying him with money to keep him here, and I want you to do the same, if necessary."

"All right, old man," said Charlie; "I'll look after Harry."

An hour after they had gone, Mountain Mag sat alone in her sitting-room, her hands crossed in her lap, looking out upon the level landscape and thinking earnestly. Barbara was still sleeping, and Monckton, too, was taking some much needed rest, but Mary, whose household gods were always first to be considered, was still trotting about the kitchen, her feet beginning to drag a little and her eyes to close with drowsiness. While Mag sat thus alone, some one opened the door of the sitting-room and came softly in Mag did not glance at the intruder; she had scarcely noted the sound. It was Cool Hank, and he came quietly toward her, only speaking when he had reached her side.

"Mag!"

She raised her eyes quickly then, and said the first words that came to her:

"I thought you was asleep."

"No," he said, "I haven't been asleep."

She started and looked at him closely; he was very pale, and evidently wearied. There was something almost pathetic in his attitude as he stood before her.

"Sit down," she said, in a softer tone. "I went in—I thought—"

"Yes," he said, "you thought I was asleep. I *couldn't* sleep until I had seen you." He sat down near her, with a question in the face he turned toward her.

But Mag suddenly found herself longing to put off or prevent the saying of that which she knew must be said.

She glanced at his arm, which was again in a sling.

"Your arm," she said, starting up; "it must need dressing."

"No,"—he put out his uninjured hand, and touched her—"it has been dressed just now: Mary did it."

Mag sank back in her chair, and looked at him silently. She had determined that he should speak first, and, after a moment, he did.

"I asked that young man who calls himself Carson, to tell you how it happened—our coming here together last night."

"Yes," she breathed; "he told me."

"Mag, *what* did he tell you?"

"He told me," she began, fixing her eyes upon his face, "that he found out by *accident*, several days ago, that there was a secret room connected with Mack's Theatre, and that a man was concealed in it. He said that he had no time to give me particulars, but that he hoped, before long, to be able to explain fully his part in what happened there, and his motives."

"Ah!" ejaculated Cool Hank.

"He didn't attempt to account for *your* being there," went on Mag, a touch of irony in her tone. "But he told me about your talk with Mack, or rather that you talked a great deal that he did not understand. From what he said, I gathered that you and Mack did not agree on some subject, and that Mack threatened you. He said that you were ignorant of what was going on outside; that Mack told you some things, but not all; and that on your way here he told you more. Then he advised me to tell the story over again—'from my point of view,' he said."

"Mag, will you do that?"

"Yes," she answered steadily; "I *want* to do it. There are some things that he does not know."

"I'm surprised to hear that. I began to think the fellow knew everything."

"Did he inform you," asked Mag, without heeding this re-

mark, "that I was one of the first to discover—the body?"

She hesitated over the last words, but there was no hesitation in his reply.

"The body of Selwyn, do you mean? No; he did not. Is that true, Mag?"

"Yes; it is true."

"I wish you would begin at the beginning, and explain all about the finding of the body, the inquest, the witnesses, everything, as if it were all new to me. Will you?"

"Yes," she said, and immediately began the recital.

She told him everything, not sparing herself. How her anxiety lest he should meet Selwyn, had made her set out in the night to find and warn the latter, and how she had found him—dead. She told him that she had removed the jewels, and why; and when he would have interrupted her at this point, she bade him wait, and went steadily on with her story to the very end.

He listened through it all with grave attention, and when she had done, went back over some of the ground, asking her to repeat certain portions of her story, and putting minute questions that surprised her not a little.

"Mag, my girl," he said, after he had pondered for some moments, "it's impossible that we should understand each other now; at least, that you should understand me. And I won't try to thank you for your noble effort to rescue me from justice, while you thought me guilty beyond a doubt. Words are useless, and until I can—" He stopped abruptly, and left the sentence unfinished. "Everything appears against me," he went on, "and I can't blame you, or anyone, for believing that I'm guilty. You *do* think me guilty, don't you, Mag?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think now," she said despondently. "I have tried so hard to believe it was a chain of coincidences. Finally I gave it all up, and settled down to the conviction that—that it *was* you. I was beginning to harden myself to it, when something possessed me to tell Barbara Wray a little of my troubles. And she—she made me ashamed of myself."

"How, Mag?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"Last evening," said Mag huskily, "not two hours before those men came to carry her off—for we all believe that was what they were trying to do—after I had told her the whole story of that fearful night, and put everything in its worst light, she said these words: 'If I ever had reason to believe in him, if I ever had faith in him, I'd *cling to it till the last moment.*'"

Cool Hank bowed his head upon his hand and something like a groan escaped his lips.

"Mag, did *she* say that?"

"Yes; and, Hank, I tell you that when I heard those words I felt better, more kindly toward you, than I have felt since—since I found Duke Selwyn's dead body."

This time it was an unmistakable groan that burst from his lips as Cool Hank arose and began to pace the room in evident agitation.

Mag watched him in puzzled silence until he came back and sat down again near her. He had calmed himself, and his manner was strangely humble and gentle.

"Do you remember something that I said to you once, when we first became friends, Mag?" he asked slowly. "I told you that I had not led a good life; that I had been wild and reckless, and had much to regret."

"I have not forgotten."

"I said that I was even yet hampered by consequences of my past mistakes, but that I meant to emancipate myself, and begin over and better."

"Yes," said Mag.

"If I had acted promptly then, and not waited like a coward, hoping that just the right opportunity would come, we might have escaped some of the misery that I have brought upon both of us. If I had been as true to you as you deserved, and had not spared myself, things might have been different, been better. But *now* that very opportunity I wanted and waited for has come, and I am tied hand and foot. Mag, I can't tell you anything,—can't explain anything,—but I beg you to have patience with me a little longer, and do me a great favor."

"Hank," said the girl turning upon him with an appealing face, "you must answer one question; you *must*, no matter what comes of it! There may have been great provocation—perhaps you are not altogether to blame—perhaps it was an act of justice—but you must tell me: *did* you shoot that man?"

But Cool Hank shook his head.

"God forgive me, Mag, for causing you all this wretchedness," he said. "I can't even answer that, either to affirm or to deny."

Mag sank back in her chair and turned her face away. She seemed to have given up all hope.

"You said you wanted to ask a favor," she said, after a long silence, and with averted eyes.

"Yes; I had promised that young man to act as he dictates, or rather to go and come as he dictates. Just before he went away, he said that I had better remain here, a couple of days at least. He said he expected to be very busy, that he didn't

'God forgive me, Mag, for causing you all this wretchedness."—Page 460.

think my arm was well, and made other excuses. I saw that he had some strong reason for wanting me to lie quiet here; so I agreed to do so, if you would let me."

"Yes," said Mag, still looking away, "they spoke of it to me, almost the last thing."

"They! Who besides him, Mag?"

"Why, his friend, Mr. Morgan."

"Oh!" He pondered a moment, and then asked. "How long have you known this Mr. Morgan?"

"He came out to see the ranch a couple of weeks before Selwyn's death, and I have seen him since in town."

"And this other—Charlie Carson's brother?"

"Oh, he has not been here so long."

"Was he here at the time of the murder?"

"No," replied Mag, wondering how he could speak so calmly of that horrible event. "I don't think—in fact I am certain he was not."

Hank sat silent for some moments, evidently pondering what he had heard. Then he said:

"I'm going to tell you all that I can, Mag, and I wish it could be everything; but first, did that young man tell you how I came to be hiding at Mack's?"

"He told me that he heard you tell Mack that you didn't come there willingly. He said he thought you must have been taken there while insensible."

"I was; insensible from weakness, or drugged, I hardly know which. I had been taken there the night after Selwyn's death, and Doctor Mitchell was brought to look after my wound. At that time I did not know where I was, although, of course, I supposed myself to be somewhere in Caledonia. I had been there four days before Mack told me that Selwyn

had been shot, and he told me nothing more then. Last night, for the first time, I learned all the rest. You have done me that much injustice at least, Mag. I did not know until last night that I, or anyone, was suspected."

"Oh!" said Mag turning her face toward him, "I am glad of that!"

Again, for some moments, he was silent; then he asked:

"When are they coming here again, Mag?"

"I don't know," she said absently. "Didn't Mr. Carson tell you that we were all going to Caledonia?"

"No; is it because of Miss Wray?"

"Yes; they think it will be safer there, until they come back."

"Where are they going?"

Mag did not answer for a moment. She had spoken hastily and feared that she had said too much.

"I think they said to Rockville; at least Mr. Carson and Mr. Morgan are going there," she replied finally.

"Will you let me stay here, Mag?"

"Why, of course. And if you stay, I will ride out to-morrow; Monckton won't be here, and some one must dress your arm."

"Oh, my arm will not trouble me: you are too good, Mag. Shall you take Nick?"

"No; I will get a horse in town. I'm going to bring out a man to look after things until we return; old Loomis, probably. Perhaps I will send him out early, and come myself later in the day."

"That would be best I should think. Mag, may I use Nick if I feel like riding?"

"Why, of course," said she in some surprise.

"Thank you. Now, one thing more; I want to write some letters; will you leave me pens, ink and paper?"

Mag looked slightly annoyed.

"I haven't the paper in the house," she said. And then came an afterthought. "I'll get some of Barbara."

At little past noon, Monckton began his preparations. He called Mag aside and they talked a few moments earnestly. And then Mag went to her "arsenal," and took from it two sturdy pistols, which she gave to him. Cool Hank, sitting alone in the next rooom, saw the act through the open door. He could not hear the words that accompanied it, but while Mag was still speaking a lovely young girl joined them. She put out her hand to Monckton, smiled upon him sweetly, and said something in a low, gentle tone as she smiled.

It was his first sight of Barbara Wray, for he could not be said to have seen her in the confusion and darkness of their short siege, and fair as she was, the lovely vision brought to his face an expression of bitterness.

Out in the other room he still saw the mysterious preparations going on. Mag brought from somewhere a soft blanket, and Mary prepared a compact luncheon. Then Mag, with Barbara's assistance, made luncheon and blanket into a knapsack-like bundle, while Monckton looked on pleased and proud, and wearing a newly acquired air of importance.

The bitterness in the face of the looker-on deepened. He turned away from the two noble girls, so busy over the mysterious preparations in which he had no part, and went softly out through the sitting-room-door, and around the house to the stables. There he found Monckton's horse saddled and waiting, and in a few moments Monck himself appeared, armed with the two pistols and a long sheathed knife. He also car-

ried a rifle in one hand, and the knapsack in the other, ready to be slung to his saddle-bow.

"Monck," said Cool Hank, as they met beside the waiting horse, "you look as if you were going to war."

"Mebbe I am," replied Monck grimly. And then, in a more friendly tone, he asked: "How's your arm, Hank?"

"Pooh!" said the other, "it's only a scratch, a flesh wound!"

"Well," said Monck as he adjusted his blanket, "I hope you'll never have a worse, Hank."

"Thank you, Monck."

When Monckton had finished his preparations and vaulted into the saddle, he hesitated a moment, and then leaned over, holding out his hand to Cool Hank.

"Good-bye, Hank," he said. "Shake, once; an' if I hain't always been fair an' friendly toward ye, jest forget it, won't ye?"

"Why, Monck!" began Hank. But the other interrupted him.

"I shouldn't wonder if I was going on a long journey, Hank, and I want to part fair and square. Tell 'em"—nodding toward the house—"tell 'em good-bye for me, and God bless 'em! 'Taint no use for *me* to try to." And Monckton gathered up his reins and galloped away.

CHAPTER LI.

GONE.

Cool Hank went back to the house, and straight into the presence of Mag and Barbara, whom he found in the sitting-room.

"Monckton has gone," he said to Mag; and then, as well as he could, he delivered Monckton's message.

"Poor old Monck," said Mag sadly. And Barbara averted her face for a moment.

As Cool Hank was about to leave the room again, Mag stopped him with a word, and as he turned, Barbara came toward him. She held out her hand, and told him how she thanked him for coming to their aid—*her* aid; how she regretted the hurt he had received; how she admired his courage. "Mr. Carson has told me all that you did," she added, "and it was half the battle. I wish that I could prove to you how grateful I am." She did not smile upon him, but she looked straight into his face with eyes that were full of unspoken sympathy.

Cool Hank's eyes fell before hers. He held her hand stupidly for a moment, then dropped it hastily, and went out without speaking a word.

Mag looked after him in amazement. "He is out of his senses!" she exclaimed, and started as if to follow him.

"No, Margaret," said Barbara gently, and putting out a hand to stop her, "he is *not* out of his senses. That man is

enduring some horrible mental agony; it is written all over his face. Be very kind, very patient with him, Mag."

Early in the afternoon, Mag, Barbara and Mary were ready for their journey to Caledonia, and Mag sought out Cool Hank to tell him her latest decision.

"We are going in early," she said. "I happened to think that if I didn't get old Loomis out here to-night, he might not be so easily started in the morning; he's *so* slow. If I can't get him, I'll send some one else."

Monckton had harnessed the sorrel colts, and made the wagon ready for their use. Cool Hank helped Mary carry out their luggage, and saw them prepared for the start.

"Good-bye, Hank," called old Mary from the back seat. "You'll find plenty to eat in the pantry."

"Good-bye, Mr. Dutton," said Barbara. "Take good care of that wounded arm."

"Good-bye," said Mag, bending toward him, with the reins in her hand. "You'll see me here to-morrow."

And Cool Hank, standing with bared head beside the wagon, answered: "Thank you, Mary. Good-bye, Miss Wray. Good-bye, Mag." And bowed, and waved his hand, and went back to the empty house with a choking sensation in his throat, and his heart very heavy.

Soon after nightfall old Loomis arrived, and for two long hours Cool Hank compelled himself to listen to his gossip. But when the old man had talked himself sleepy, and gone stumbling to Monckton's room, Cool Hank, sitting alone beside the kitchen table, reviewed much that he had heard, and assured himself that he had not listened in vain.

From out of the mass of information volunteered by the old man, he made a mental note of various items. First, that the

Overland stage from the east had brought into Caledonia, on the night before, a large amount of money, with which the Company intended to purchase certain mining lands that lay southwest of Rockville. Second, that this money was to go to Rockville by that day's stage, which, for reasons best known to the Company, had delayed its start until late in the day—in fact, had but just taken its departure when Mountain Mag and her party arrived at the St. Charles Hotel.

And here Loomis had remarked, by way of parenthesis, that he "Guessed the gals wouldn't be over lively in town, for them Eastern chaps, Dalton and Morgan, and that skittish brother of Charlie Carson's, was all off to Rockville on a lark. And," he added, "if you were to speculate ten years, ye wouldn't ever guess who was drivin' that stage."

Of course Cool Hank promptly said: "Who was it?"

"Connolley, sir; Doc. Connolley. He's hired out to the Overland."

It was this story of the Rockville-bound treasure, and of the passengers and driver of the Rockville stage, that Cool Hank turned over in his mind after Loomis had gone to his repose. A long time he pondered, and then, taking the lamp in his hand, he went into the sitting-room, where Mountain Mag had left him the pens, ink and paper. Here he sat for another hour, writing and sealing several letters.

When Mountain Mag came the next day, she found Loomis, sitting in the open doorway, in solitary possession.

"Where's Hank Dutton?" she asked quickly.

"Hank? Oh, he's been gone these four hours. I saddled Nick for him at crack o' day. There's a letter or somethin' in on the table, that he left for you."

Mag hastened to the sitting-room, and found upon the table

three or four letters tied in a packet, and one, apart from the others, addresssed to herself. It ran thus:

DEAR MARGARET:

I have taken Nick and set off on an errand which I know that you would approve, if I could tell you its object. I go hoping to come safely back with Nick, and if I am not here by to-morrow's sundown, it will be because I am disabled, or dead. If I fail to return, wait until you can be reasonably certain; and in case you learn that I am dead, open the bundle of letters which I leave to your care, and send them to the persons to whom they are addressed. God bless you, Mag, and good-bye. Whatever my faults and vices, the one good thing in my life has been and is the love for you which will go with me to the end.

H. D.

With this note clutched tightly in her hand, Mountain Mag rushed to her room, and, flinging herself upon the bed, quaffed there, alone, the bitterest cup of sorrow that life had yet held to her lips.

CHAPTER LII.

THE START.

The stage which was reputed to bear the treasure of the Overland Stage Company, and which also bore our friends, Stanhope, Vernet and Dalton, as inside passengers, and Connolley, as driver, upon the box, took its way across the prairie in a fashion so leisurely that it was nearing sundown when it reached the little adobe house occupied by Father Miles, and, contrary to the usual custom of stage-coaches, halted there.

Three or four horses were tied to some rough stakes beside the house, and the rattle of wheels brought to the door four

men, the first being Doctor Mitchell, who was closely followed by Dan Strong, Monckton, and Father Miles.

"Well," said the Doctor, when the coach had drawn up before the door, and the inside passengers had alighted, "how goes it?"

"Perfect, everything, so far as heard from," replied Vernet. "Dame Rumor is an excellent ally sometimes."

There was an air of purpose about them all. Their dress was especially adapted for rough usage, and all were heavily armed.

"We're ready now, are we not?" asked Doctor Mitchell, glancing about him.

"I'm not ready, Doctor," said Stanhope. "I want to make a fresh toilet, if Father Miles will let me use his dressing-room and his mirror."

"By all means," replied the good Father. "The room is at your disposal; unfortunately I don't own a mirror."

"Well," said Stanhope, "I carry mine with me."

He took from the coach a small leather valise, and followed Father Miles into his single room, while the others waited outside. When he reappeared, he was arrayed in a soiled and ancient set of garments that had once been the property of a *bona fide* emigrant from Sweden, and their only merit, if merit they had, lay in the fact that they fitted as if they were his own. He had smeared his face artistically with dirt, and added some tiny brown patches here and there that might pass, even under a close inspection, for freckles; and when he had extracted from his face all its natural expression, hung his head, drooped his shoulders, dropped his lower jaw, and assumed a look of sheepish stupidity, his disguise was pronounced perfect. Charlie Carson had sheared his head, according to their pro-

gramme of the night before, and this had proved the very finishing touch. He was the stupidest-looking Swede in the land.

After the failure of the first robber hunt in which the two detectives had taken part, they had given much thought as to how the next effort should be managed. They must not again trust to numbers, and so, perhaps, once more find traitors in their midst. Something besides force was needed. After many consultations, with and without the presence of Doctor Mitchell, Connolley and Strong, they had decided upon the plan they were now putting into execution.

They believed that the chief *rendezvous*, if not the permanent abode of the outlaws, was not far from Death Pass, and nearer to Caledonia than to Rockville. The wilderness all about Death Pass was well adapted for hiding, and for making sudden raids, while the region about Rockville was more barren, with fewer chances of quick concealment, and aside from the coach road, impassable for horses, and difficult even for pedestrians. There was another reason for believing that the robber's *rendezvous* was on the Caledonia half of the dividing territory. But this reason Stanhope and Vernet argued only when they conversed apart from the others. It was that Selwyn, Mack, and Cool Hank Dutton, had made Caledonia, rather than Rockville, their chief abiding place.

Believing, then, that the place and the men they were seeking were near the Pass, they had planned their expedition.

First, the rumor that money was to be carried *up* the mountains, instead of down, was set afloat, and this was judiciously followed by another rumor to the effect that a small body of soldiers were to come down from Rockville, to escort the coach over the last half of the journey, which would be made

at night. Then pretexts had been hatched by which to delay the coach, so that, instead of going through the Pass at noon, it would arrive there just before daybreak.

They were now traveling slowly, not to reach their destination too soon, and conversing on the way.

"I should like to know," said Doctor Mitchell, after he had made for the tenth time a critical survey of Stanhope's make-up, "I should like to know why you have seen fit to come out in this fashion."

"So should I," said Dalton quickly.

Vernet said nothing. He knew the object of this masquerade, and had argued in vain to induce his venturesome friend to give up his dangerous scheme.

"Well," replied Stanhope, "I'll tell you. If all turns out as I hope it will, and if the outlaws follow the programme we've laid out for them—to stop us in Death Pass, rob us and leave us—we would run great risk in following them in a body. Now, *I* propose to cut and run; conceal myself, not too far away, and try for a chance to follow some one of the gang to his lair. It will be safest, and simplest.

"It won't be very safe for *you*," said Dan Strong.

"Pshaw!" replied Stanhope. "Look here: I am dressed like an emigrant, and look like a very green one. Before we reach the Pass, I'll get up on top with Connolley. If they challenge us, I shall be terribly frightened, watch my chance and dive into the woods. You will all have to get back into the coach and drive ahead a short distance. But one of you must manage to see where I go into the bush; and when you think the right time has come, if I don't make my appearance, you must follow me."

"I don't quite understand," said Strong.

"Well, you will in good time. I'm pretty handy at dodging, and if I can once get upon the track of one of these fellows, I believe I can pipe him home. One man can follow a trail better than half a dozen. My plan is practical."

"It does look so," admitted Strong. "But you, going alone, would be taking all risk. Suppose you should be discovered?"

"I've considered all that. I've put on this disguise with that very possibility in view. Don't be concerned about me; *I'll* come out all right."

At a little after midnight they made a long halt, lunching heartily, and allowing the horses to feed. When they resumed their journey, the "small hours" were beginning to grow long again.

And now, at four o'clock in the morning, they are at the mouth of Death Pass.

Connolley stops the stage, gets down, and puts his head in at the coach door. For a few moments they talk in low tones. Then Stanhope gets out and mounts, with Connolley, to the driver's seat.

CHAPTER LIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

When the coach enters the Pass, the five men inside, and the two upon the box, become silent and alert. The horses mount upward slowly, and there is no sound to be heard save the fall of their feet and the rattle of the heavy wheels. They have just traversed a bit of rugged winding road, and are

half way through the Pass, when Vernet says, in a low tone:

"It was here that the coach was waylaid on the night of Selwyn's death."

Dan Strong bends forward to peer out, but no one speaks.

A little further yet they go in silence, and then Strong says, "I think it must be about here that poor Haines and Jackson—" He stops suddenly; a single word has cut short his speech.

"*Halt!*"

"What's this?" they hear Connolley say, as if he were too much astonished or frightened to add more, and then the stage stops.

"Don't stir, you on that box!" they hear some one say, and a black face appears at the stage-door. "Get out of this!" a gruff voice commands; and the inside passengers hear another voice, at the same moment, bidding Connolley "Come down off of that!"

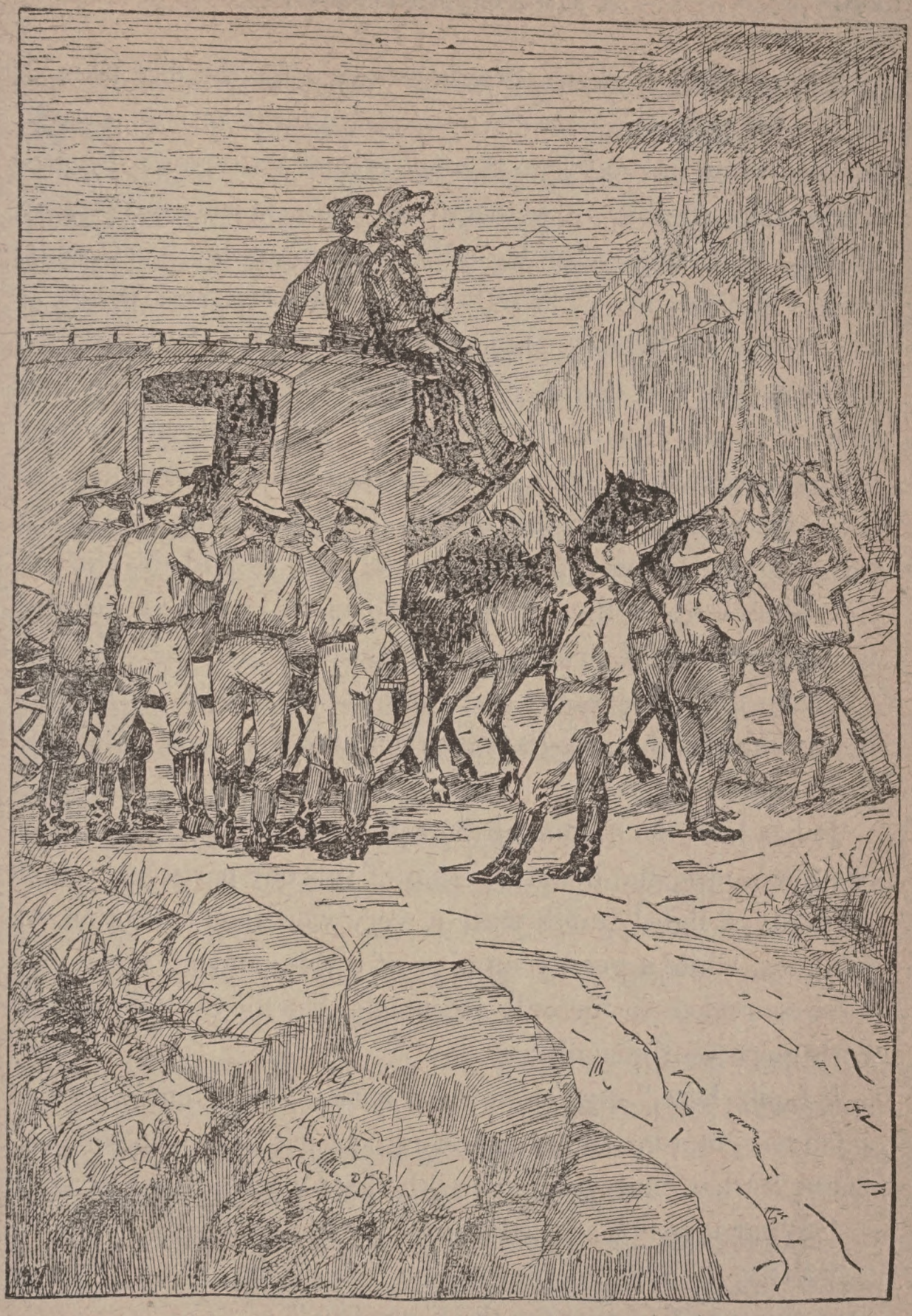
Two men have the horses by the bits, two others are menacing Connolley and his companion, and half a dozen more swarm at the coach-door.

Van Vernet is the first to get out, and he moves slowly, as if divided between reluctance and terror.

"Hold up your hands!" commands the gruff voice, and Vernet puts up his hands promptly.

Then Doctor Mitchell begins to clamber out slowly, and with many remonstrances. Connolley throws down his reins and jumps to the ground. But Stanhope, upon the box, does not stir.

"Here, you!" says one of the robbers, putting a foot upon the wheel and raising himself as he points a pistol at Stanhope's head, "git down."



"Don't stir, you on that box!"—Page 474.

As the pistol is raised, Stanhope seems for the first time to realize his position. He starts up and utters a terrific screech. At the same instant Dan Strong creates a diversion by pretending to stumble in getting out of the coach, and falling heavily, clutching at the leg of the man upon the wheel as he strikes the ground. The fellow is pulled back, and, before he can regain his balance, Stanhope has bounded down, uttered another yell, and vanished into the woods. Three or four shots, and a volley of oaths, are fired after him, and two of the men start in pursuit. But they do not follow far; all their interest is with the coach. They care for the spoils, rather than the chase, and they come back to find the six victims drawn up in line, with twelve hands stretched heavenward, and to assist in rifling their pockets.

When this is done, the coach is searched, while Vernet and his friends stand statue-like, each man covered by a pistol held in the hand of a robber.

It has been the custom of the robbers to relieve their victims of all weapons, and in anticipation of this our party had armed themselves lightly, and with a very worthless collection of weapons, while a goodly number of knives and revolvers had been concealed in the only receptacle that the outlaws treated with respect—the mail-bag.

"Look here," says one of the outlaws—the one who had acted as spokesman-in-chief—coming back to the line of prisoners, "what have you done with that Overland money, eh?"

"What money?" asked Doctor Mitchell sharply.

"Why, the boodle going up by this coach, to buy mines or something of that sort for the Company."

"*I* don't know anything about your Overland business," growls the Doctor.

"Where's the driver of this thing?" demands the outlaw, beginning to pace down the line. "Which is him?"

"I'm the driver," says Connolley quietly.

At this moment one of the outlaws says something to the man next him, who comes forward and peers at Connolley.

"What's the matter?" asked the leader.

"Why, I thought—" began the fellow. "Yes, and I'm right! This 'ere's Doc. Connolley."

"What!" cries the leader, "Connolley the Regulator?" And then the outlaws join him in a hoarse laugh.

Greatly to the surprise of his friends, Connolley answered quietly:

"Yes, I'm Connolley the Regulator. And if there's any of my men among ye, as I dare say there is, I jest want to say that I'm glad to see 'em in such a fair way of gittin' to the only place they're fit for."

"Whar's that?" demands a voice.

"Somewhere between the sky and the ground, at the end of a rope." And then, with a sound in his throat that might have been a dry chuckle, he adds: "I'm glad to notice that Pete Finlayson ain't among ye."

For a moment his friends fear that Connolley's freedom of speech may work him ill, for there is a murmur of indignation among the outlaws, and one of them cries:

"Give him to us! Let's try it on him."

But some one in the rear moves toward the speaker and says something, of which all can distinguish the last words—"give us all away." And then the leader calls sharply:

"Boys, tend to business. Now, then, Connolley, where's the boodle?"

"I guess it's where you won't be able to lay hands on it to-night," says Connolley indifferently.

"*Where is it?*" demands the outlaw again.

"Wal, it hain't left Caledonia yet," says Connolley serenely. "The fact is, they found it had leaked out that they was goin' to send money up to Rockville, so they concluded not to ship it just yet."

The leader growls out an oath, and turns back to the coach.

"I've a good mind to rip up their old mail-bag!" he mutters.

"*I* wouldn't," says Connolley, "not while the soljers are so handy."

Possibly this suggestion has its effect; the fellow puts down the bag. Evidently he is in a chronic state of disgust. He has searched, with his own hand, the pockets of his victims, and he knows that he has not reaped a rich harvest. There is very little luggage, and the two baskets which contain the elements of one or two frugal meals, he does not deign to touch.

"I never struck such a lot of empty pockets," he mutters. Then he turns back to his prisoners. "I've a mind to search you fellers again," he says. "You can't *all* be dead broke."

No one offers reply or remonstrance.

"Take off yer coats," he commands.

The six coats are promptly removed. The leader takes them one by one, turns them inside out and upside down, pinches and pulls and shakes. But they contain nothing of value, and he bids the owners put them on again.

"Take off your boots," he says next.

The boots come off as promptly as did the coats. Again there is a fruitless search and, then the leader says:

"There, git back with ye, one at a time. Boys keep your pistols up."

They all re-enter the coach, and Connolley climbs upon the box and gathers up his reins.

"I should think you'd feel it rather a come-down," says the leader, "from boss Regulator to hired man. *I* should."

"Well," retorts Connolley, "I guess when *you* get promoted, it'll be a good deal higher. Have you got anything more to say?"

"No. If you've still a mind to go on to Rockville, I won't hinder you."

"Then I guess we'll go right along."

"Hold on," says Doctor Mitchell, with his head out of the coach window, "where's that Dutchman, driver?"

"By Jupiter!" exclaims Connolley, "where is he, sure enough? Call him, somebody?"

"I don't think it would do any good," breaks in Vernet, speaking for the first time. "He does not understand a word of English."

"We can't stay around here waiting your convenience much longer," breaks in the outlaw leader sharply. "Your Dutchman's half way back to Caledonia by this time, if he's kept on as lively as he started. Boys, stretch across the Pass; let's give them a salute to hurry 'em up a bit."

The whip in Connolley's hand comes down quickly, and the coach rattles away up the Pass, followed almost instantly, by a volley of pistol-shots.

"Confound it!" growls Dan Strong, "I'd like to return that compliment!"

But the coach dashes on, and only slackens its pace when they have reeled around two or three curves, and are a mile away.

Then they get out again and confer together, and quickly come to a decision as to their course. Vernet, who has naturally assumed the leadership, suggests that they drive quietly back to where they were attacked, and look for the trail of the fictitious Dutchman. Stanhope no doubt would contrive to leave landmarks for their guidance, he says.

When they halt again, at the place where they left the outlaws, they find it solitary. No trace of the robbers, and none of Stanhope.

While Connolley and Strong unharness the horses, Vernet goes a little way into the thick wood, guessing, as nearly as he can, at the place where Stanhope vanished. He is back in a few moments.

"I have found his trail," he says. "But we'll have to wait for a little more daylight before we can see the others. I divided it, and here is half."

He smiles and holds out a crumpled bit of something white.

"Newspaper!" says Strong in surprise.

"No; cloth. Paper is too easily blown about. Listen: he will leave these clues about a rod apart. There are four sorts. This white cloth, when it is found *alone*, means, *straight west.* A bit of blue wool yarn means, *go north.* Red, means, *south*, and yellow, *east.* We must all make good use of our eyes, and look, after every clue that's found, for broken twigs and branches, hanging a little over head, or detached and dropped upon the ground. These will mean southwest, northwest, southeast or northeast, according as they are to the right or left of the bits of cloth or wool. Do you get the idea?"

They all answer in the affirmative.

"Then I think we had better eat something: day is coming fast."

"Isn't there danger of these bits of things being found by the outlaws, rather than by us?" asks Connolley.

"Almost none. They may find one or even two, but how many of us, do you think, would notice one of these if we were ignorant of its purpose, or give it a second thought if we saw it? And they will be so far apart that even a suspicious person would scarcely connect the second with the first, even if he saw two in succession."

By the time their breakfast was disposed of, the horses cared for, and the coach drawn away from the road, well under a group of sheltering trees, day was dawning grayly, and the party plunged into the woods.

When they had reached the spot where Vernet had found the first piece of cloth, he said:

"You see there is an opening among the trees here, that aided me in finding this. Let us go forward slowly for another rod, and if we do not find a white clue, we will wait for more light."

The next is a white clue, larger than the first, and they find it pinned conspicuously to a tree that stands directly before them. They leave it as they find it, and pass on to the next, and then to another, and another, all of them white.

CHAPTER LIV.

A LOST SCENT.

When Stanhope took his flying leap from the top of the coach, he ran straight ahead through the thick brushwood, and

the random shots fired after him only served to accelerate his speed. He heard, for a few moments, the sound of pursuit not far behind, but when he checked his pace to listen, all was silent about him, and he turned, rightly guessing that the outlaws had given up the chase.

He crept back cautiously, until he was once more at the very edge of the wood where it skirted the roadway. It was at the moment when the leader of the outlaws was questioning Connolley, and, acting again upon his favorite theory, that the boldest course is the safest, he climbed nimbly into a tree just opposite the coach. Seated thus astride a big bough, and quite hidden by the clustering foliage, he could hear all that passed below.

When the coach rattled away, the robbers drew back from the road, grumbling at the small returns of their labor.

"I guess it won't hurt us much to carry off all we've got *to-night*," growled one of the party. "A nice go, this is! I tell you, you ain't goin' to get me into any more of *these* deals, when we've got a regular bonanza right in our hands if we've a mind to work it! I'm gettin' sick o' this dallyin' business! If the captain can't come up to the scratch, let him stay away. *We're* all in favor of it, and the majority rules—eh, boys?"

"That's the talk!" cries one; and then another and another takes up the refrain.

"Look here, boys," says the leader impatiently, "this ain't no place to palaver, and no time either. It's close onto daylight, and we can't get back to our holes any too quick. If you're for takin' this thing into your own hands, well an' good —*I* ain't goin' back on ye. But come along; we kin talk in a safer place than this."

The robbers seem to recognize the wisdom of these remarks

and in a few moments they are all in motion, walking westward as swiftly as the trees and bushes will permit, and with Stanhope following behind at a respectful distance, scattering his clues as he goes.

For a long time they keep steadily on, westward at first, and then southwest, the way beginning to be more broken, rocky and steep.

The robbers travel like men accustomed to the route, and confident in their solitude. They do not once look behind them, and Stanhope has only to follow, and to make no sound.

And now they have reached a place where the trees stand wider apart, and large patches of sky can be seen glimmering between them. But the growth of underbrush is heavy, and the way leads up a steep hill, that seems to have no vanishing point.

At the foot of this hill the robbers pause and exchange a few words, and Stanhope strains his ears to hear, but he only catches fragments of the dialogue. At first he can put no meaning into what he hears, but a moment later two of the men moved away from the rest, turned their faces southward, and begin to skirt the hill. They pass very near him, as he stands behind a clump of bushes, and he hears a few words as they go. He is quick at putting "two and two" together, and he combines what he has heard and extracts from it this meaning: the robbers have horses concealed somewhere on this side of the hill, and the two men are going to give them drink.

"So they keep a suburban livery," thinks Stanhope, as he moves slowly up the hill. "I'll try and pay a visit to *that*, too, all in good time."

The path grows rough and steep, and steadily upward.

Rocks and underbrush are everywhere, but the openings among the trees grow more frequent. Stanhope finds it difficult to move from opening to opening, through bush and over crag, without making his presence known, should one of the outlaws chance to look back.

It is clear enough to him, now, why the robbers' horses are stabled below the hill, and it soon becomes even more evident.

When they have traversed what seems to Stanhope like miles of this rocky upland, zigzagging from left to right, and always going higher, they come suddenly out upon the edge of a precipice, and along this the robbers walk for a short distance, stopping, at length, at what appears to be the highest and ruggedest point within view.

The trees near the ledge are few and small, and Stanhope is obliged to drop upon his breast, and crawl serpent-wise through bushes and around rocks until he is near enough to catch their words, though he cannot see the speakers.

"I wish you would wait for them," he hears the voice of the leader say. "I don't like to leave it so."

"Well, I *won't*, and that settles it," a voice replies. "It's safe enough to leave it down."

"It's agin the rules," says a third voice.

"Everything's agin the rules—for *us*," the second voice replies. "I'm hungry and tired—you're always givin' me the dirty jobs—I *won't* stay." And the speaker emphasizes his dictum with a string of oaths.

Then several of the outlaws begin to expostulate, seeming to close around the rebellious one, and all speaking at once. Under cover of their voices, Stanhope drags himself forward through a low-growing thicket, and parting the leaves before

him, finds that he can see the group upon the edge of the precipice. They stand, almost to a man, with their backs toward him, and facing the chasm.

Evidently the leader is angered at the delay caused by the mutineer. He turns away from him without more words, and drops upon one knee beside a huge rock that is surrounded by a tall growth of fringe-like grasses.

"Get hold of the rope, two of you," he says peremptorily.

Instantly two of his men come forward, kneel beside him, and thrust their hands among the grasses.

"Here it is," says one, and immediately produces an end of rope, which seems to have been wound about the rock and tied there.

They uncoil it, Stanhope watching their proceedings wonderingly. He is near enough to see that the chasm must measure at least fourteen feet across, the opposite side being a very little the higher. It is rocky and fringed with hazel brush, and whatever lies beyond is thus shut out from his view.

And now the robbers have uncoiled the rope, and one is winding it "hand over elbow," while the other is putting in yard after yard, that comes slowly up from the chasm below. After a time the rope is all drawn up, and extends tautly across the chasm. Evidently it is moored to something.

"Looks as if they were going to give a tight-rope exhibition," Stanhope thinks.

The man slides his hand along the line until he is close behind the leader, who has now grasped the rope firmly.

"Pull!" says the leader; and the men, who have grasped the rope, one behind the other, move back a pace and give a tug.

"Here she comes!" cries one.

Stanhope sees an agitation among the bushes opposite, hears a crackling and snapping, as twigs bend or break, and then a dark object comes into sight, pushing its way through the bushes like the head of a mighty serpent. The men at the rope move backward, still pulling, and the dark object comes on, out over the chasm, and lands on the rocks at the feet of the outlaws. But not all of it. One end still rests upon the opposite bank, and the watcher sees clearly that it is a *draw-bridge*, of primitive make but apparently strong.

"Now," says the outlaw leader, as he steps behind the men and stands beside the rebellious fellow, who has seated himself upon a rock a little aloof from the rest and assumed a look of sullen indifference, "go over, boys."

One of the men bends down, as if to see that the bridge is securely placed, and then walks lightly over. Another, and another, and another follows, until the leader and the rebel are the only ones on this side.

Then the leader draws his pistol, and turns toward the man on the rock.

"Now, sir," he says, "don't let me hear any more 'won't' from you! Go over that bridge, and stay by it until the boys come up the hill. If they don't give a good report of you when they get into quarters, I'll make an example of you. This is the third time that ye've tried to kick up a fuss, and it's got to be the last. Go over, and hold your tongue."

Evidently the fellow is cowed. He stammers out something that the leader will not hear, and goes sulkily toward the draw-bridge.

"No more talk," the leader says. "You're a fine fellow to belong to a band like this! Connolley must a had a *nice* lot of Regulators!"

But even the bruised worm will turn. When the rebel is fairly on the bridge, he looks back and says sneeringly:

"He wouldn't a had as much use for *me* as he'd a had for *you*."

"Don't be too free with your lip!" says the leader as he sets a foot upon the drawbridge. "You haven't got out of the woods yet."

"No," retorts the other, "and neither have you. I guess I'll come out about when you do."

When the outlaws have gone out of sight on the other side, the unwilling picket selects for himself a very comfortable spot near the brink of the ledge, with a big rock at his back, and his face set squarely toward the bridge and the opposite bank. He takes from one pocket a cigar, from another a match, and is soon smoking and looking—so Stanhope thinks—disagreeably comfortable, in spite of his recent dissatisfaction. The cigar is a good one—it was taken from Dalton—and the soft breeze brings its pleasant odor straight across the chasm.

Stanhope, on the opposite side, grows restless, lest the trail of the retiring robbers becomes utterly lost to him. But the only way out of his unpleasant predicament seems to be by the path of patience. So he remains motionless behind his leafy screen, and grows cramped and hungry, and begins to look upon himself as a man entrapped, and forsaken alike by his friends and enemies.

His patience deserts him, and he is almost ready to make a sudden dash upon the all-too-comfortable sentinel, when that personage seems to have caught at a bright idea, for he gets up quickly, looks about him, and crosses the drawbridge. Arrived at the opposite end, he walks quickly down the hill, where he is soon out of sight among the trees and bushes.

Stanhope waits a few moments, lest the outlaw should look back. "He's going to join the others at their horse hotel, I fancy," he mutters. Then he crawls out of his hiding-place and advances to the edge of the chasm.

Looking down, he does not wonder at the anchored drawbridge, nor at the care with which it has been made and guarded. The rocky walls are almost perpendicular, and they stretch down and down, ending in a swift, narrow stream, its waters inky black, more than a hundred feet below.

To the right and left the chasm stretches, and the stream runs, as far as the eye can see; beyond this the outlaws have indeed a secure retreat.

Stanhope examines the bridge, which is made of a tree cut in halves, and lashed together, side by side, with rope and leathern straps, the flat, roughly hewn surfaces turned uppermost.

Over this structure Stanhope goes quickly, and finds at the opposite end, a second rope, attached like the first, tied securely about the body of the nearest tree. He sees that the ropes not only serve to place and remove the drawbridge, but they add to its security by keeping it from being pulled over the edge on the upper side, for the bridge extends across the gulf with hardly half a foot to spare at either end.

And now he thinks that the difficult part of his journey is done. Before him is a well defined path, leading over and around rocks and through brushwood, straight westward. The ground is almost level for some distance, but grows more and more open as he progresses. The sun, fairly risen, penetrates the trees and shines in strips and spots of brightness about him. Before him, a long way off, the tallest of mountain-peaks towers skyward, the blue mist that envelopes them touched into brightness by the glow of the sunlight.

The scene is a fair one, but it is the path, rather than the landscape, over which our young detective rejoices.

It leads him across this bit of table-land, and then descends, sloping gently until it reaches a small stream, clear and shallow and swift. And here, to his utter amazement, it comes abruptly to an end!

CHAPTER LV.

PRISONERS.

For a moment Stanhope ponders over this singular phenomenon. He wades across the shallow stream, but there are no traces of a path or of footsteps on the further side.

He goes back to the stream and gazes up and down. The rivulet flows from the north, and in that direction nothing meets his view save rocks and bushes and scattered trees. He turns about and gazes southward. A few rods below, the creek glides in between steep, rocky banks, that seem to rise higher and straighter further on.

Suddenly the young detective utters a low laugh, and says to himself:

"Why, of course! That's it! The clever rascals!" He tucks his coarse trousers into the tops of his boots. "I'll try it this way first," he mutters, and steps into the stream.

The thing begins to look quite plain to him. He thinks that the outlaws, to cover up their tracks, have waded a short distance up or down. He moves slowly down the creek, now at one side, and now at another, keeping a sharp outlook

on either hand. He sees nowhere a sign to guide him. When he has reached the point where the banks began to rise, he hesitates for a moment, and then goes on, lifting his feet as little as possible and pushing them forward through the water, to avoid, as much as he may, any splashing sound.

And now, as he advances between the rocky walls, the stream narrows, the walls rise higher and straighter, and presently the sun's rays cease to fall upon the rippling water, which glides between the rocks with a gurgling noise, and grows, as it darkens, perceptibly deeper.

At a point where the rocks on either hand seem highest, and abandon the perpendicular to jut over the stream, Stanhope pauses to gaze at what seems to be two or three shelving steps or ledges of rock, that appear in a fissure of the main projection, and seem to lead upward to nothing.

"Looks as if the stream had once been a cataract," muses Stanhope, putting his hand against the lower ledge, and craning his neck to look higher. "Natural staircase leading to nowhere, and wisely left unfinished by Dame Nature."

He withdraws his hand and lifts a foot half out of the water, tempted to mount Dame Nature's unfinished stair. The movement makes an increase of sound in the echoing stillness about him, and he gently lowers his foot again—failing of success, as many others of us do, by that one step that was not taken.

He utilizes the ledge, however, by leaving upon it one of his bright-tinted clues, dipping it first in the stream to make sure its adherence to the rough surface, and then he goes cautiously on.

Still the stream narrows and the water darkens. He cannot see the pebbly bed, and feels his way cautiously, with one

foot advanced, and a hand pressing lightly over the rocks at his side. And now the stream curves gently. He is so near the angle that he can see the wall suddenly descend, and a grassy open just beyond. He bends forward and takes one more step—such a step! There is a splash, a crash, a cry! He realizes them all, instantly, but dimly as if in a dream.

The splash; it is himself, going down, down, and the water closing over him. The crash; it is from above, something heavy and hard, that falls upon his head as if to crush it as the water gurgles over him. But the cry: even in that moment *he* has uttered no sound—that comes from the rocks above him.

His next sensation is a strange one, a mingling of moisture and ache and dizzy weakness, with the sound of voices. Then he seems to feel himself outstretched upon something clammy and cool, and the voices are all about him.

"He's done for!" a voice says. "The water's finished him."

"Not much it didn't! It was that rock. He wasn't under long enough to drown. Hi! look! there's life in him yet."

"Is there, then? Well, so much the worse for him. We'll have to do it over, that's all."

"How d'ye s'pose he got here?"

"He's a spy; I knew we was watched. The deuce will be to pay *now!*"

"Hold your gab; he may hear ye"

"Not him! There ain't enough life in him."

"I tell ye there is. Let *me* git to him. There; now hist up his head."

"See here, Blowey, what the Moses d'ye mean to do?"

Half a dozen voices have uttered these sentences, but now the dialogue confines itself to two.

"I'm goin' to see if he's got enough life left to tell where he came from, and how he got here.

"D'ye want to be trapped?"

"If we bring him round we ain't obliged to *keep* him so, eh? What's the matter with ye all? Hist his head, I say; there!"

All these words Stanhope has heard dreamily. And now his head is lifted, and a burning fluid goes gurgling down his throat. He feels the blood begin to stir, and knows that it is coloring his face.

"See!" the voice says, "I told ye so! His slip, and the water, as he went under it, broke the force of the rock. He'll tell his story mighty quick, and then—"

"Yes, *and then* what?"

"Well, I guess, mebbe, he'll like hangin' as well as drownin' or havin' his brains knocked out. Here, you, wake up and give an account of yourself."

Stanhope has come back to full consciousness now, and to the knowledge that he has fallen into the hands of the outlaws. The last words addressed to him are accompanied by a shake, and, for the first time, he opens his eyes and stares blankly about him.

He is lying upon a flat, moss-covered rock, at the edge of the little stream, which at that point has grown so suddenly and treacherously deep, and he sees about him a small, grassy, half circle of level ground, with the rocky wall enclosing it completely. Just opposite the spot where he lies, is a dark opening, which looks like the entrance to a natural cave. Between himself and this opening stands a small clump of trees, with the remnants, or beginning, of a camp-fire beneath their shade. Crowding close about him, with faces that are curious,

'There is a splash, a crash, a cry!"—Page 491.

stolid, startled or menacing, are a dozen swarthy, dirty, villainous-looking fellows, each armed like a pirate.

It needs no second glance nor second thought to tell him that he is in the very stronghold of the outlaws.

"Hullo!" says one of these gentlemen, "he's a comin' out!"

The words act upon Stanhope strangely. He sighs, closes his eyes, and seems to sink back into a state of apathy. In a flash, and aided by the momentary glance about him, he realizes his position. At the very instant when his foot, advancing through the no longer clear water, had poised above the sink-hole, one of the robbers, perched upon the crag above, had heard his movement below, and looked over, and instantly pushed down one of the loosely-poised rocks that were directly above him, at the same time uttering, for the benefit of his comrades, that warning cry which brought them to the brink of the stream. What Stanhope does not know is, that the crash of the rock, the cry of the robber, and the splash of his body in the stream, had so taken the outlaws by surprise that they had rushed forward, dragged him from the water, and placed him safely upon the rock, which usually served them for a dining-table, before they became aware that they had rescued an interloper, and not, as they thought, one of themselves. And what the robbers do not know is, that the interloper whom they had fished from a watery grave, had not been killed by the falling rock before he sank beneath the water, but that the blow had only stunned and the water revived him; and that he lies now, with closed eyes, simulating insensibility, but really listening intently, and trying to think himself out of his present damp and unpleasant predicament.

"There," he hears one of the two last speakers say, "so

much for *your* wisdom, Blowey. He's gone off in another swoon. Lord, don't waste any more good liquor on *him.*"

The man addressed as Blowey picks up one of Stanhope's moist hands, and lets it fall limply.

"Mebbe he did get a thumper, after all, from Dowd's brickbat," he says, seeming to resign his theory. "Anyhow, we won't waste time over him. Pull him off the table, boys, and hurry up grub. We can't git what we've got to do over none too soon. If he comes to, we'll have it out with him. If not—"

The sentence is completed by a brutal gesture in the direction of the creek and followed by a laugh from the companions of Blowey, who seems to be in command.

Stanhope feels himself pulled, none too gently, from the rock, and further inland. A moment later he hears the sharp crackle of freshly kindled brushwood, and feels the glowing heat of flames near at hand. They have drawn him toward the fire, on the side nearest the rocks, and he feels the warmth about him and he says to himself:

"The rascals have done the very thing! Between their whiskey within and their heat without, I shall soon be dry and but little the worse for my wetting."

And he lies still with his eyes closed, and hears, wonderingly, the bustle of preparation going on all about him, and knows without seeing that they are cooking breaktast, cleaning and loading pistols and guns, rolling up bundles, and making unmistakable preparations for a long journey. As they work they converse in low tones, and separate groups. After a little, Stanhope becomes aware from sundry gurglings and smackings and exclamations of impatience or gratification, according as the bottle has passed from their hands,

or is yet to come into them, that they are lightening their labors with frequent pulls at something stouter than water. Presently they are all at breakfast, and he finds himself seeking an answer to three questions:

Where are the outlaws going? That they are going soon, he is assured. What will they do with him? And will Vernet and the others arrive in time?

Suddenly, upon the clatter of the breakfasters, breaks a voice, loud, clear and so different in quality and accent from the others, that Stanhope almost forgets himself, in his strong desire to open his eyes and see the speaker.

"Eh!" says the voice, "what's this?"

Stanhope hears a queer, halting, clankling sound, and then realizes that he is the object of the question. He hears the clanking sound very near him, and becomes aware of a body interposed between himself and the camp-fire. He notes too, in the same instant, that the robbers have become suddenly silent. Then a hand touches him, and the same voice says:

"Another victim, I suppose!"

"He don't look much like *you*, does he?" responds the voice of the leader. And the fellow adds: "No; he ain't none of *our* captures. He's a visitor, jest dropped in on us." And the rough voice cries: "Hullo! he *is* comin' round! Warm and almost dry! Here, you, wake up, can't ye?"

The invitation is accompanied by a poke in the ribs that causes Stanhope to wince and wisely conclude it is time to open his eyes. He opens them accordingly.

On his left, and between himself and the fire, a man has dropped upon one knee beside him, and is scanning his features narrowly. He is past middle age, his hair is nearly white, and his eyes dark and piercing. His face is smooth-shaven,

and but for the firmness of the mouth and chin would be almost delicate in its outline. The hand that is put out to touch him is white and soft, and Stanhope notes, as an astonishing point of the *ensemble*, that, among these uncouth, vile-handed, ragged-bearded, roughly-garbed fellows, this man is neatly dressed in well fitting clothes, and is scrupulously clean.

Thus much Stanhope sees while seeming to stare vacantly, and then his eyes turn to the man on the other side. He is a big, brawny ruffian, with a straggling, reddish beard, a short nose, and small, inflamed eyes; a very bull terrier in human form. He is even dirtier than any of the group of dirty men who are staring at them, and Stanhope, who never forgets a face, knows that he has seen this outlaw before.

"Who is he?" asks the kneeling man impatiently.

Stanhope notes the look that the two men exchange. It is the look of two duellists who mean war to the knife.

"He's a spy," says the outlaw angrily. "Some of *your* friends, mebbe."

The old man looks again and shakes his head.

"No," he says; "I never saw him before."

The outlaw leader bends over Stanhope and gives him a shake.

"Get up, you," he says gruffly, "and give an account of yourself."

Stanhope only stares vacantly, and puts his hand to his head with a great show of feebleness.

"Get up, I say," growls the outlaw again. "Don't stare so, like a confounded idiot."

But the vacant look still meets his, and the hand still feebly fumbles about aimlessly.

"Blowey," says a man who is doing something at the fire, "I guess that chap's head's riled. He's stunned like. Don't yer remember how Bill was, after he got that crack at—"

"Shut yer mouth, will ye?" broke in the man called Blowey. But the words have their effect, for after another prolonged stare he turns away, muttering: "He *is* dazed, or I'm a goat!"

And Stanhope feels himself reprieved for the time.

"I'd like to know what's routed *you* out," Blowey says, stepping unconcernedly across Stanhope's prostrate form, and addressing the old man, who now rises slowly, the movement revealing the cause of the clanking sound. The old man is a prisoner. A long, slender, steel chain trails after him across the green, and is secured about his left ankle.

They are standing close together face to face, and almost over the recumbent and interested detective.

"I want to know what you are about to do," the old man says fearlessly, "and I came out to ask."

"And *I* want to know what *you* mean to do!" retorts Blowey, with a big oath.

Instead of answering this counter question, the old man looks him squarely in the eye and says:

"I have just learned why your Captain, as you call him, does not make his appearance. In fact, I have learned several things that enlighten me a little as to the meaning of some of your manœuvres."

"What have ye found out?" asks Blowey contemptuously.

"What I have discovered I gathered from the conversation of your own men. And the first explains why I have been shut up here for nearly three months, and have never had the

honor of meeting your Captain. It seems that your Captain is dead—"

"Wal," interrupts Blowey, "I *meant* to tell ye that."

"That he has been murdered, and that your second in command is more than suspected of being the murderer. Wait; is this true?"

"What if I say it is?"

"Just this: you have been tormenting me, as go-between for these superior villains. If they are both gone, I suppose *you* are the head scoundrel now."

"You'd better look out!" growls Blowey. And then, with a hoarse laugh: "Yes; I'm the head scoundrel now, if that name suits ye."

"It suits *you* admirably," says the old man.

"Wal," ejaculates the fellow, casting a sharp and threatening glance at two of his men who have approached, and now at once draw back again, "I s'pose ye've made up yer mind to have dealings with me, now that I've been promoted?"

"From the talk of the men, I gather that since the loss of your superiors, you and your gang have been steadily unfortunate—"

Blowey growls out an oath at the expense of his talkative subordinates.

"That you have attempted to rob a stage, and been poorly paid for your effort; that some other enterprise of yours has failed; that you have grown uneasy and are about to forsake this stronghold,"

"Wal?" growls Blowey.

"This being the case, do you intend to take me with you?"

"Yesterday," said the outlaw slowly, "I made ye an offer. I said that if ye'd sign them papers, I'd set ye free in twenty-

four hours arter they was turned into money in Rockville. Are ye going to do it?"

He looks up and the eyes of the two men meet squarely. Those of the one are resolute; those of the other are brutal.

"No," says the old man firmly.

"Then," says Blowey with an oath, "I say that I *ain't* goin' to take ye with me."

"Ah! What do you mean to do?"

"I'll tell ye," the villain says slowly. "I'm the head scoundrel now, as you say, and I'm goin' to run things on a easier an' simpler plan. I ain't goin' to carry any dead weights—me an' my men are of the same mind; we've talked the thing over. Ye're goin' to sign them orders, an' have that money sent over to Rockville so we kin git it, an' no questions asked, or ye're goin' to stay right here till Gaybrull's trumpet wakes ye up. Ye kin have this feller to keep ye company, if ye like the style of him; the dirty spy." And the outlaw indicates Stanhope by the thrust of a heavily shod foot in his direction.

The old man looks fixedly but unfalteringly into Blowey's face.

"I tell you again," he says firmly, "that I will not sign those papers, and remain a prisoner in your hands, relying simply upon your word for my release." And he turns back, as if to re-enter the cave from which he came.

"Wait," says the outlaw sharply. "There's something that I reckon ye didn't happen to hear. There's a young woman in Caledonia that mebbe will be willin' to pay somethin' jest to git news of ye. We kin leave ye here, and stand a fair chance of gittin' well paid jest for *tellin'* her that her Pa is dead. The Captain's seemed to sort of foresee that you'd be

a hard un to deal with, so he sent her word that her Pa wanted her, and she came right along. We ain't quite made up our mind, yet, whether we'll carry her off or jest kind o' tap her purse."

"Her?" cries the old man eagerly. "Of whom do you speak?"

"Oh! I'm talkin' about a Miss Barbara Wray, that landed in Caledonia about a week ago."

"BARBARA!" The name seems wrung from the old man's lips.

"Oh, ho!" says the brute before him. "I thought that would fetch ye. Hullo!"

He turns sharply to look at Stanhope, who, still staring stupidly, has struggled to a sitting posture.

Lying there an enraged but helpless prisoner, Dick Stanhope has seen something rise slowly and cautiously above the rocks opposite him, and just behind the group of outlaws, who are all waiting with interest the outcome of the conversation between their leader and Stephen Wray; this object he has quickly recognized as Van Vernet, and now he sits up, thus drawing the attention of the outlaws to himself.

The only one who does not heed his movement is Stephen Wray, who mutters again, mechanically, the name, "*Barbara*," and stares at vacancy, like a man suddenly turned to stone.

CHAPTER LVI.

VICTORS.

Such, at the moment when Stanhope begins to demonstrate his activity, is the situation.

Suddenly something flashes before the eyes of Blowey. He has a momentary impression that his vacant-faced, half-drowned prisoner has developed new and startling energies; that he is springing upon *him*, the robber chief, with face and eyes aflame, and is bearing him down, down, down.

This is what has really happened: Stanhope, who has moved slowly, and deliberately measured his distance and his man, has bounded up, clutched him by the waist and the throat, and hurled him to the ground, bringing him, by a dexterous twirl, face downward, with his huge, bare throat right across the chain that trails from Stephen Wray's ankle. The outlaw lies as he has fallen, and Stanhope has possessed himself of a pistol from his belt before a hand is lifted to stay him.

The fall of the body, the sudden tug at his chain, rouses Stephen Wray, and he sees what the robbers have not yet seen, three men already in the enclosure; others, he cannot tell how many, stealing down the rocks beyond.

On the ground, not four feet away is a pile of loaded muskets, left there by the outlaws. With a bound the old man is beside them; has seized a weapon, and springs back to Stanhope's side.

Who can say just what happened next? Men are leaping about, shouting, cursing, fighting, falling; shots are fired; knives gleam.

For a moment the attacking party seems to have all the advantage. Then, out of the cave rush three of the robbers, who have been within since they first left their rocky table. They fall upon their assailants with a yell. Blowey is up, and Connolley is down.

Suddenly, the interest seems to center in the foreground of the small arena, where, upon the rock that so lately has served a peaceful purpose, Blowey and Stanhope have clinched and are struggling. It is not an unequal contest. The big outlaw is heavy and strong, but Stanhope is quick and lithe, a trained athlete.

Then a cry bursts from the lips of Van Vernet. He has seen, in a passing glance, that two of the outlaws have sprung upon Stanhope from behind; that they have seized and prisoned his arms, and that Blowey is drawing a long knife from his belt. With this warning cry, Vernet dashes aside the robber who opposes him, and springs toward Stanhope. Instantly Dalton follows; and then the outlaws rush to the aid of Blowey. The shouts and the rush, cause the robber to stay his hand for an instant; then, with an oath the knife is again uplifted, and aimed at the heart of the now helpless detective.

"*Stop!*"

It is a cry so quick, so clear, and so commanding, that it causes all to pause involuntarily.

Blowey, with head thrown back and arm upraised, darts a quick glance toward the rock opposite, from which the cry proceeds, and then with a wild yell, he totters back and falls

splashing into the stream. At the same moment, the men who have prisoned Stanhope's arms relax their hold, and flee toward the cavern.

It is a time of panic to the outlaws, of surprise to their assailants.

Stanhope regains his feet, casts one quick glance at the rocks where stands the object of the outlaws' terror, and gives a ringing shout.

"Now, boys, quick! we have them!"

Ten minutes later, the robber-hunters are masters of the field.

When he sees that their victory is complete, Stanhope turns and looks toward the place where the apparition which has so terrified the outlaws still towers. It is Cool Hank Dutton, pale and grave, standing erect upon the rocks, with his crippled arm hanging free from its supporting sling.

"Dutton," calls Stanhope, "in Heaven's name, come down!"

Slowly, and in silence, Cool Hank descends the rocky incline, steadying himself with his uninjured hand. As he reaches Stanhope's side, Van Vernet advances toward them from the mouth of the cavern.

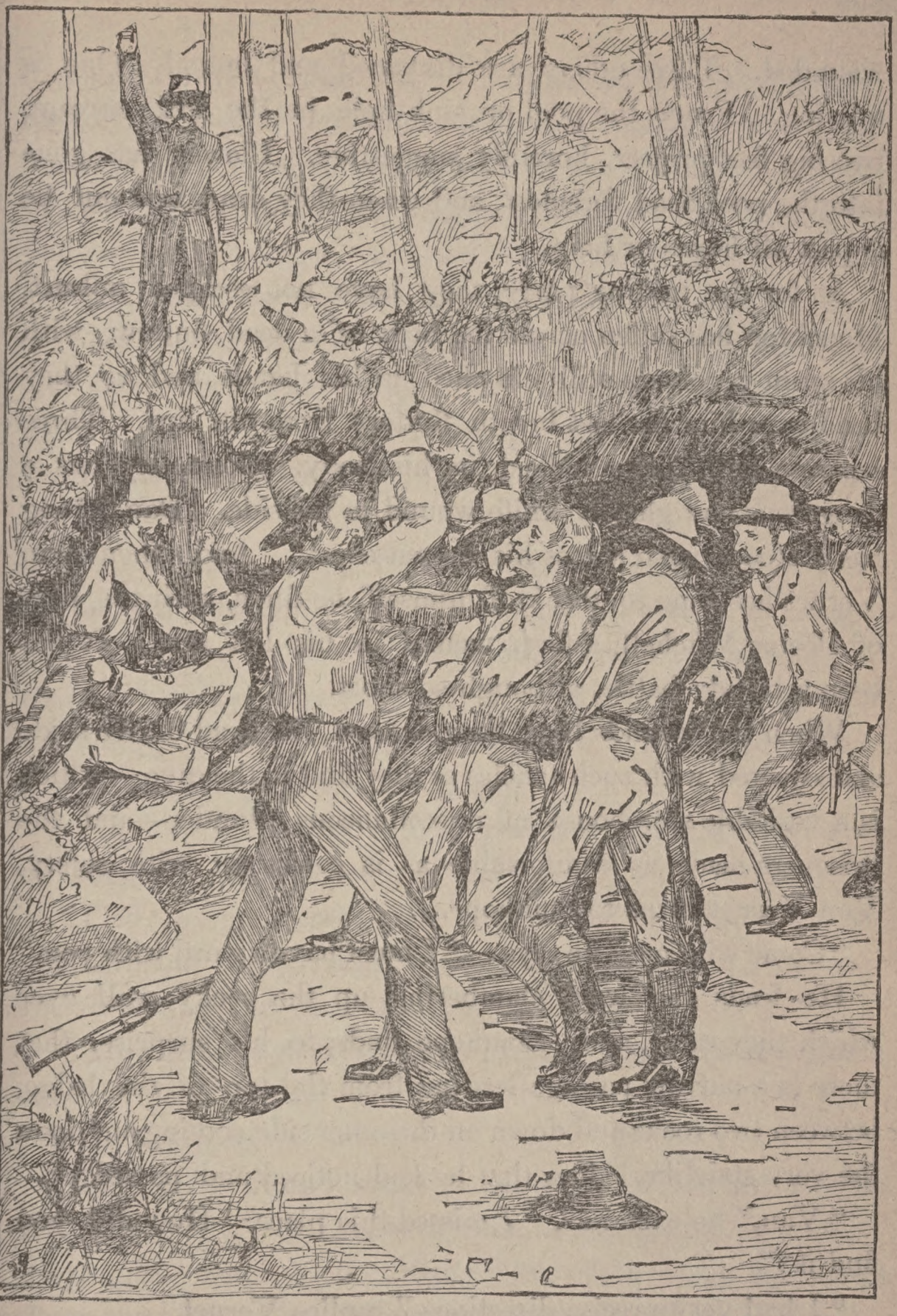
"What is this?" he says sharply, looking from Stanhope to Cool Hank Dutton.

"I am the leader of these outlaws," says Dutton, holding out his single hand. "You had better secure *me*, too."

"*Oh!*" ejaculates Vernet, and turns upon his heel.

But Stanhope says quietly: "Yes, I guessed as much, Dutton. You are still upon parole." And he, too, turns to survey the field.

Four of the outlaws are dead, and three are seriously



"The knife is again uplifted, and aimed at the heart of the now helpless detective."—Page 503.

wounded. Three others are disarmed and bound. One is missing. From the pool or sink-hole in the little stream, two big feet project, horribly suggestive. Blowey has gone into the pool head foremost, and when they draw him out he is past all hopes or help.

As for the raiding party, they have not escaped unhurt. Monckton has fallen across the body of a dead outlaw, with his spent revolvers still clutched in his hands, and as they bend over him the last breath flutters from his lips. Three separate balls have lodged in his body. Connolley has a dangerous and ghastly knife wound in his side. Dan Strong has a bloody gash across his brown cheek. And when Van Vernet has time to think of himself, he finds, with the help of Doctor Mitchell, a flesh wound in his left arm. It has been a bloody battle, although so short.

When the wounds have been dressed, the dead drawn aside and covered with such articles as they find in the cave,—which is a veritable storehouse of miscellaneous plunder—and the prisoners made as comfortable as is consistent with safety, Van Vernet turns to Stanhope.

"Come with me," he says. "I must have a word with you."

He leads the way, clambering up the rocky wall over which they came, and Stanhope finds, to his surprise, that there is a narrow passage leading from the top of the ledge, between two rocks and down on the other side, coming out upon the very stairlike ledges that he had noticed and passed by.

"Van," he exclaims, "*I* missed this place. How did you find it?"

"I had very precise directions," replies Vernet.

"Eh! From whom?"

"That's just what I brought you here to tell you; at least

that's part of the reason. You must know, then, that we followed your clues without much difficulty, until we came to that drawbridge and were about to cross it, when we heard voices. We got behind the bushes, and in a moment along came three fellows; two reeling drunk, and all quarrelling."

"Ah, yes, I know; they were three of this gang."

"We took that for granted, and in a very few moments we had them sprawling. They were too tipsy to show much fight. And whom do you suppose we recognized in one of them—the soberest one?"

"Hedley."

"Yes, Hedley; one of Connolley's old Regulators. Well, we just tipped a wink to Connolley, got out a rope, and rigged it up for an execution. The fellow is a coward at bottom, and the whiskey was in our favor. We got a good deal of information out of him; among the rest, how to reach the robbers' lair without wetting our feet much."

"Oh," says Stanhope with a grimace, "you did better than I, that's all. Where are your prisoners?"

"Tied to three trees near the creek," answered Vernet. "With your help, I think I can persuade them to come over the rocks and join their friends."

"All right," says Stanhope. And the two men step down into the little stream.

"Mr. Carson."

Stanhope turns and starts at the sound of his last *nom de plume*. Cool Hank Dutton is close at hand, and in spite of his crippled arm and the slipperiness of the way, he comes down the rocky steps like one accustomed to them.

"I want a word with you," he says to Stanhope.

"Very good; let's get out of the water first."

Stanhope moves on, and in a moment they have passed the rocky walls, and step out upon the grassy bank. Then Cool Hank looks from one to the other and says:

"Gentlemen, of course I consider myself your prisoner, and I hold myself subject to your orders, but I have a strong reason for asking how long you intend to remain here."

Van Vernet eyes him keenly.

"We will answer that question," he says, "when we know what your strong reason is."

Cool Hank turns from Vernet and addresses his answer to Stanhope.

"I gave a promise to Margaret Drood," he says, "which I do not want to break. I have borrowed her horse and wish to return it safely. If you intend to go at once to Caledonia, I am content to go as a prisoner with the rest, and ask only one favor at your hands—that is, that you will let me see and talk with Mag. I heard something said a moment ago which led me to think that you meant to wait here for reinforcements—"

"I see," said Stanhope, "and you don't want to wait." Then he turned to Vernet. "Van, what do you intend? Others beside Dutton would be glad to set out for Caledonia. There's that old man, Stephen Wray—"

"True," said Vernet; and then he glanced at Dutton and hesitated.

Cool Hank promptly took the hint, nodded understandingly to Stanhope, and walked slowly along the bank of the creek. When he had passed out of hearing distance, he halted, faced about and stood waiting.

"That fellow's a perfect riddle," said Vernet, looking after him; "he's well named."

"Yes. However, I think I begin to understand him.

Leave him to me, Van. Cool Hank will open his lips at the right time. Now, what is your plan?"

"Why, we are not a strong guard, Dick, and this is how I left matters at the Overland office: They are to muster their strength, drivers and all, and as many outsiders as they know they can trust. They counted on a reinforcement, too, by yesterday's coach from the east. They expect to be strong enough to take matters into their own hands. Their plan was to wait, and if we didn't come back or send a messenger within a given time, they were to set out in search of us. Now, as we have run down our game so soon, I think we will send some one to Caledonia to carry the news and bring help. We can't leave these wounded men, and we can't take them until assistance comes."

"Good! I'll be the man to carry the news; and I'll take Cool Hank and Mr. Wray, and be responsible for their good behavior."

"Very well. Now let's go up the hill and bring in our three prisoners."

"Dutton," said Stanhope as they approached Cool Hank, "is there a better or a shorter way to Caledonia than that by which we came, along the coach road, you know, and across that ingenious drawbridge?"

"Yes," answered Cool Hank.

"Then, if you'll lead the way, we will set out for Caledonia in fifteen minutes. Where did you leave Mag's horse?"

"A quarter of a mile from the creek."

"Well, get him, and bring him nearer. You'll have to change horses, if there is one that's fresher in that hidden stable. Can you lead the way to that, too?"

Cool Hank hesitated.

"*I* can," interposed Vernet, "and there are ten good horses there. Dutton, we've forced so much out of Hedley, that you may speak without fear that you are betraying your comrades."

"Gentlemen," said Cool Hank earnestly. "I could say nothing now without creating the impression that I was trying to justify myself at the expense of others. I have been second in command of this band of robbers since I came among them. For a short time I have been Chief, nominally at least. More than this I cannot say. I am grateful to you both for your courtesy and your trust in me. After I have seen Margaret Drood, I shall ask no more favors, and at present I shall ask but one other: that you will put no questions to me now."

"Granted," said Vernet shortly, and turning toward the hill. "Bring up your horse, Dutton, and wait for us here."

CHAPTER LVII.

STEPHEN WRAY'S STORY.

Stanhope and Vernet had gone but a few paces toward the drawbridge when the latter broke out:

"Confound your mysterious protegé, Dick! He cut me off just as I was about to ask one question that sticks in my mind!"

"What was that, Van?"

"I'd like to know what there was, in the simple appearance of that man, to scare the pluck entirely out of those rascals, and give us such an easy victory."

"I'm not clear on that subject myself, Van, but I can tell you what I think. You know he played the ghost just as successfully, the other night at the ranch?"

"Yes."

"And perhaps you remember all that I told you about his interview with Mack?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, I think that for some reason Dutton and Selwyn have changed identities. Wouldn't that explain it?"

"Why, yes. If they have been taking him for Selwyn, and are aware, as they must be by this time, that Selwyn is dead, that *would* explain it. What do you make of the fellow, anyhow?"

"I'll tell you. I've been studying him, and I believe I've hit somewhere near the truth. The trapping of Wray and holding him for ransom, was Selwyn's work, and was planned and executed without the knowledge or consent of Lieutenant Dutton. He rebelled against it; that was the one desperate deed that he could not wink at. He wanted to set Wray free, and they differed about it. As for the decoying of Miss Wray here, I don't believe that Cool Hank knew anything of it. I expect that was what Mack whispered to him—the one thing I didn't manage to hear that night in the secret chamber. Now, supposing my notions to have some foundation, can't you put yourself in his place—can't you see that he could not offer anything like a true statement of his case without making himself appear a coward, if no worse?"

"Well, yes, supposing what you think to be true. And hasn't it occurred to you that there may be another reason for his reticence?"

"Another? what?"

"Possibly he can't make his case very clear without implicating himself in that murder business."

"Umph!" said Stanhope, keeping his face set steadily up the hill, "*possibly!*" But his friend knew that there was skepticism in his tone.

They found the three prisoners just as they had been left, and drove them back, after releasing their feet, at the muzzles of their own pistols. They found Cool Hank Dutton sitting at the base of the rocky wall, and Mountain Mag's favorite steed, Nick, grazing near the stream. As they approached with their prisoners, Hank arose and began to scale the rocks ahead of them.

The morning was well advanced when Vernet and Stanhope appeared again among their companions. Dalton and Strong were busy over the fire, which they had rekindled. They had found the storehouse of the robbers, and were preparing a meal. Doctor Mitchell and Stephen Wray sat apart from the rest, in earnest conversation.

If the horrible suggestion of Blowey had struck the heart of the father with a palsy of terror, the conflict had roused the *man*, and shackled as he was, he had fought valiantly. It was Dan Strong who had struck off his fetters, and no words were needed to tell them all that here was the missing father of Barbara Wray.

He told his story briefly, and it proved that the detectives, in constructing a theory, had hit the truth. And he could not hear too much of his daughter.

They told him of the forged letter, and how it had deceived both Barbara and Mr. Follingsbee; how she had arrived in Caledonia, and of her grief and consternation upon learning that he was not there. But they did not name Duke Selwyn;

and when they told how she had found a friend in Mountain Mag, and a home at the ranch, they did not mention the attack and attempt to abduct Barbara.

"I see it all now," Stephen Wray said, fixing his keen eyes upon Vernet's face, "and I'll never again trust myself as a reader of the 'human face divine.' It was that man Selwyn who planned all this. It never occurred to me to suspect him, until it was too late. When I reached Caledonia there was a letter from Selwyn awaiting me in the post-office. It was by his written directions that I called for it before registering at the hotel. In it he deplored the necessity for his presence in Rockville on the day when I would arrive, and gave most plausible reasons. It was for our mutual benefit, he said, and might result in considerable gain. *He* suggested that I drop my identity. I remember the very words: 'In such a place as C——,' he said, 'there might be adventurers from N. Y. who would not fail to recognize your name, if not your face. To be known as a man of wealth here is simply to court danger. In your place, and especially as I cannot join you for several days, I would assume a name less likely to make me an object of too much interest to brigands.' Think of that, sirs! *to brigands!* That fellow! I fell into this trap, and all the others he set for me, although when I started in the coach for Rockville I was beginning to smell a rat, as the saying is. Not that I suspected *him* then, but it struck me as odd that the stage should be so lightly freighted at a time when passengers were so numerous. But when we were halted, and I found myself the only object of special attention from the robbers, I began to do some serious thinking. And when I was brought to this place alone, and the driver and the other passenger were turned loose, I saw the whole scheme. It did'nt

need the arrival of my fellow-passenger, three or four days later, to confirm my suspicions; they were already firmly grounded. Yes, sir, he was one of this very band! And he laughed in my face when I told him what I thought of him."

"Is that fellow among these men?" asked Vernet quickly.

"Yes," answered the old millionaire, with a nod toward the row of still, shrouded forms, "he's there, and *I* shan't mourn him."

"And all the time that you have been a prisoner, you have never seen the leader of this band?" queried Stanhope.

"Never once! That ruffian, Blowey, has been the go-between. Perhaps I committed a blunder by boldly declaring that I suspected Selwyn; but I had got my eyes open at last, and although they denied all knowledge of such a person, I could see by their manner that I had startled them, and they were puzzled how to act. They sent a man to confer with their leader, and in the meantime left me pretty much alone. But when they got their orders, the game began. They bullied and threatened. Once they got up a hanging farce, and actually had me at the end of a rope. But I knew that my neck was safe, and I laughed at them. About two weeks ago, I tried to escape. It was the first chance that I had found, and the force was weakened by half a dozen; but they caught me in the act, and then Blowey chained me by the leg. I got so desperate, at last, that I told Blowey I would negotiate for my freedom,—that was a little more than a week ago—if he would bring me face to face with the ringleader. I took it for granted that Selwyn was the man, and for the first time Blowey forgot to deny it. He sent away a messenger that same night, and they did not approach me again on the subject for two days.

Then the messenger came back, and he must have brought some startling news, for it set them all in a flutter and Blowey afterward grew daily more aggressive. Messengers were coming and going; raiding parties have been scouting and coming back sullen and almost empty handed; my position was growing more and more difficult to endure as the robbers' schemes began to miscarry. Good Heavens!" cried the old man, looking about him as if for the first time he fully realized the peril from which he had been rescued, "if I had known, during this last miserable week, that my daughter had been so nearly dragged into the toils, the villains would have had me at their mercy. *Now,* I will spend thrice the money they wanted to extort from me, to find and punish that renegade, Selwyn."

Vernet and Stanhope exchanged significant glances.

"It will not be necessary," the latter said in a low tone; "Selwyn is dead."

"Dead! when? how?"

"He was shot, more than a week ago. I can't tell you the details at present; there are reasons why explanations must be put off until we are all in Caledonia."

"Oh! and when do we set out?"

Vernet glances across the sward toward the other prisoners, and said in a still lower tone:

"My friend, here, is going at once, with one of the prisoners. If you feel equal to the ride, you can go with them."

"May I ask why—"

"You may see that we can't move these men in their present condition, and in ours. Carson will send out reinforcements, and wagons to convey the wounded,"

Stephen Wray glanced about him.

"Let me understand," he said. "Do you intend to let it

be known, before you arrive with the prisoners, that you have made this capture?"

"By no means!" broke in Stanhope. "We shall flourish no trumpets; it might stir up a hornet's nest."

"I thought so," said the old man. "Then it won't do for *me* to go. Besides, I don't like to desert my rescuers. I want to lend a hand in landing these rascals where they can't get into more mischief. My daughter is safe, you tell me, and this young man will inform her that I am alive and well." Stanhope nodded. "Then I can wait; in fact, I prefer to wait."

Having endured so much at the hands of the outlaws, he was grimly resolved to have a part in their punishment. Even his fatherly anxiety gave way before this stern determination. The same spirit that had kept him courageous and defiant through his long captivity, swayed him now that it had come to an end.

While they talked, Stanhope had been breakfasting heartily, and as he was preparing to leave the camp, Dalton drew Vernet aside. "Van," he said, "I don't like the idea of sending Carson back with that fellow Dutton."

"Why?"

"He is one of the outlaws, and how do you know that he may not lead the young fellow into a trap? They are talking of taking a shorter cut, Carson says—Dutton, of course, to lead the way. Don't you think that I had better go with them?"

"Do you want to go?"

"Well, yes. To tell the truth I want to get back as soon as possible; I won't have them say that I am trying to keep out of harm's way. I don't know what to make of this Dutton;

but if he means to show himself in Caledonia, I want to be there, too."

"Well," said Vernet, turning away, "I'll speak to Carson." And he did.

"I will not take him;" said Stanhope, looking annoyed. "Why must he go?"

Vernet recounted the reasons given by Dalton.

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Stanhope "I know better; he has a yet stronger motive."

"What is it?"

"A woman—of course!" impatiently.

A shadow fell upon Vernet's face, but it passed instantly, and he said, with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes:

"He did give another reason. He thinks that it isn't safe to trust a *youngster* like you alone with Cool Hank."

It was Stanhope's turn to look amused. "Have you noticed Cool Hank and Dalton? Their courtesy is freezing. I believe that each thinks the other the guilty man."

"To believe that, *you* must hold them both innocent.

"I do," said Stanhope significantly. And then he added hastily: "Very well; let Dalton go with us."

In a few moments, Stanhope, Dalton, and Cool Hank Dutton mounted upon three of the robbers' best horses, were riding toward Caledonia. When they were gone, Stephen Wray approached Vernet, whom he seemed to recognize as the leader of the rescuing party.

"How much time do you give them to go and return?" he asked.

Vernet considered a moment. "It is nearly noon," he said, "and I don't think that we can be more than sixteen miles from Caledonia."

"Sixteen miles!" ejaculated Mr. Wray.

Vernet beckoned to Doctor Mitchell. "Doctor, how far do you think we are from Caledonia?"

"We're a good deal nearer than I ever dreamed we should find a robbers' roost. We can't be more than—let me see; it's twelve or thirteen miles to the Pass."

"Yes," interrupted Stephen Wray, "if you mean the usual point of attack."

"I do," answered the Doctor. "And from the Pass, by the way we came—and a mighty thorny, rocky, uphill way it was—it can't be more than four miles."

"Do you mean to tell me," cried Wray excitedly, "that all these weeks I have been a prisoner within *sixteen miles* of Caledonia, and only *four* miles from the highway?"

Both the listeners nodded.

"Gracious Heavens!" cried the old man, now livid with rage. "Did I tell you how I was brought here?"

"No," said Vernet; "I think not."

"Well, sir, I was blindfolded right beside the coach, and put on a horse. That was in the forenoon. My horse was led until late in the afternoon, when we stopped in the woods, and ate a cold luncheon. Then I was blindfolded again and led on. We slept *two nights* in the woods, and my horse was changed twice. I was all the time blindfolded, and riding, while the men walked. We went uphill and down, forded streams, and scrambled through bushes, and on the morning of the *third day*, they took the bandage off my eyes, right here where we stand."

"Umph!" said Doctor Mitchell, "it's a regular game of theirs, that. They wanted to discourage any thought of escape or rescue. They led me a similar dance once—the villains!"

CHAPTER LVIII.

PODUNK REAPPEARS.

It was growing dark when Stanhope hastily entered the office of the St. Charles, and hurried to Charlie Carson's room, whither that young man instantly followed him. Stanhope had parted from his two companions at the edge of the town, and hastened by a roundabout course to the office of the Overland Stage Company, leaving Dalton and Cool Hank to arrive in their own way.

"Are they here?" was his first question.

"Yes," answered Charlie, seeming perfectly to understand. "Dalton came first, and Cool Hank a little later. They managed it very neatly. I don't think half a dozen people saw either. Dalton's up stairs now, talking to Miss Wray, with Mag's old woman for propriety; and Cool Hank's in the parlor, closeted with Mountain Mag. What's up?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," looking about the room. "Did you bring my traps, Charlie?"

"Yes; here they are," dragging a large traveling bag from underneath the bed.

Stanhope drew off his coat and attacked the bag.

"I'll give you particulars to-morrow, Charlie,—" jerking the bag opened, and beginning to take out various articles of apparel. "We've got the outlaws caged, and I've been to the Overland, to start them out after the prisoners. We've found Mr. Wray; that's what Dalton is telling Miss Barbara. Hold

in, Charlie;"—for Charlie, not daring to shout his joy, was indulging in a series of ecstatic contortions. "Cool Hank has owned to being in league with the gang."

Charlie sobered instantly.

"I half expected that," he said. "I'm confounded sorry. But how—"

"He's on parole," broke in Stanhope. "Hand me that box, Charlie."

Charlie gave him the desired article. "What the dickens are you up to?" he asked, staring blankly.

"Turning myself into Podunk again as fast as possible. How's Harry Hatch."

"He's all broke up. I've got him locked in, down at the Doctor's cottage. Hope the Doc'll excuse the liberty—had to do it. Hatch was badly scared, and almost ready to go into jim-jams. Mack's been harrying him, and got him completely rattled."

"You don't think he'll fail us?" asked Stanhope quickly, working as he talked, and swiftly transforming himself into Podunk.

"No; he won't do that. All that he asks is that we stand between him and Mack. By the by—" He checked himself and looked at Stanhope, who was rapidly completing his toilet.

"Fire away, Charlie. What is it?"

"The old man came back last night."

"Oh, did he?" Stanhope readily understood "the old man" to mean the proprietor of the St. Charles Hotel.

"Yes; and in less than half an hour Mack was here, and they were closeted together."

"Ah! Got any idea of the subject discussed?"

"Not in words; but early this morning Mack was here

again, and the two adjourned to Selwyn's room. They went through the baggage, and found something that they've been very mysterious about all day. I don't like their goings on. Mack and the old man swear by each other, and they mean mischief of some sort. I believe that scoundrel Mack put something in Selwyn's trunk that day."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Stanhope dryly. "Now, then, Charlie, I must be off. I'll be back within the hour, and we'll go and see Hatch. Try to find out what's in the wind, won't you? If I shouldn't be back as soon as I expect, perhaps—yes, I'm sure, I'd better send a message to Dutton."

"To Dalton, you mean—"

"No; to Cool Hank. Say nothing to Dalton; he's the confoundedest, contrariest fellow! Watch for an opportunity to say this to Cool Hank Dutton: I want him to keep an eye on Dalton. If Dalton does not go out, neither must Hank. If Dalton *does* go out, Hank had better follow, or go with him. Cool Hank will understand, I think. Do you?"

"Well, vaguely. I'll tell him, old man; and I'll try and keep my weather eye open."

"Good. Now, then, how do I look?"

"Natural as life! Same old Podunk! The boys'll be glad to see you. Say, what if Dutton asks for you, eh?"

"Tell him the truth—no; he don't know me as Podunk. Tell him you don't know anything about me; it won't be far from the facts."

"That's so," assented Charlie ruefully.

"Now, skip ahead, Charlie, and see if the coast is clear."

A moment later Stanhope, or Podunk, was hurrying away from the St. Charles, avoiding the most public highway, and gradually dropping into the old swagger.

CHAPTER LIX.

MAG AND COOL HANK.

Let us go back to the time when Stanhope's companions arrived in Caledonia.

When Cool Hank came to the St. Charles, Charlie Carson was standing upon the threshold. Cool Hank dismounted and nodded to him.

"Good evening, Charlie," he said carelessly. "Anybody up stairs in the parlor?"

Charlie shook his head, and came down the stairs.

"Just have my horse looked to, Charlie. I'm going up to the parlor. Will you ask Miss Drood to come down as soon as convenient?"

Charlie nodded, and Cool Hank passed in and up the stairs.

When Margaret Drood opened the parlor door, ten minutes later, she found him pacing restlessly up and down the room. She started and flushed as her eyes met his. Then with her characteristic promptness of action, she turned, looked out into the hall, and closed the door.

"Hank!" she exclaimed, coming toward him. "Charlie did not tell me that it was *you*." And with a long breath: "Oh, *how* you frightened me this morning!"

"Then you went to the ranch?"

"Surely; you knew that I would."

He came very near her, and looked down into her face, but he did not touch her, or put out his hand.

"Margaret," he said simply, "I have come to clear up,

"Oh, *how* you frightened me this morning!"—Page 522.

so far as *you* are concerned, some of this mystery. Can you hear me now?"

"Yes," she said, and stood looking at him fixedly.

He brought forward a chair, and placed another near it for himself.

"Let us sit here," he said. "You look tired, Mag."

"I am tired," taking the seat he had placed for her. "So many things have happened since yesterday, and we have just heard such news, good but startling—Miss Wray's father has been found."

"Yes; I knew it."

"You, Hank!"

"I left him this morning, to come here."

"Left him!"

"Yes. Very early this morning I took Nick, and rode to the place where he was kept a prisoner."

"To the robber's hiding-place—*you!*" She checked herself suddenly and a deathly pallor overspread her face. "Oh," she sighed, shutting her lips hard and beginning to tremble, "*what* is it?"

"It is not a justification that I am attempting," he says, looking at her earnestly, "and I want you to promise me not to regard it as such, and not, for the present at least, to disclose what I am about to tell you. But no; I can surely rely upon your discretion. When you have heard me, you will understand my reasons. I have been a worse man than you thought, Mag; but not worse, I hope, than you think me *now*."

Mountain Mag had recovered her self-command by an effort, but she was still pale and her lips were tightly compressed.

"Go on," she said quietly. "Whatever it is, let me hear it—get it over."

"I will," he said. "And if it pains you, you can guess, while you listen, what it costs me to tell it. I have told you that I was the youngest son of a thrifty New England farmer, who educated me as he thought good, and sent me out into the world to seek my fortune, as he had sent three brothers before me. All that is true. My brothers were content with their own state, with simple homes and simple lives; they married and settled down soberly to the business of life. But I wanted to see the great West, and I took the small sum of money that my father had given me to begin my life with, and set out. I had visited various mining lands before coming here. I had learned many hard lessons, and grown worse with the learning. I made money and lost it; and I learned to drink, and to gamble. I had been having a steady run of hard luck in Colorado, about two years and a half ago, when I started in search of a new field. I was reckless and discouraged, ready to yield to any temptation that promised better fortune, and in this frame of mind I made the acquaintance of Duke Selwyn.

"You have seen him and know the manner of man he was. Success was written upon him, but he might have possessed all of his strong points, and if he had been lacking in that ease and grace of manner for which he was so noted, he could not have fascinated me as he did. I am thought to be a man of strong will, yet when I first knew Selwyn I was but wax in his hands. I was the embodiment of failure; he, of success. I suppose he saw that he could make me useful, and, from the moment we became friends, fortune seemed to smile upon me. He let me understand clearly that I owed it all to him, and so we drifted on together. Everything that he touched prospered, and he spent money as freely as he made it. I began

to view all things through his eyes, and to be as conscienceless as he. I am not going to trouble you with details, nor to show you the steps by which I was led on and on. His motto soon became mine: 'Get money; it will buy all else.

"When these mines were opened, here and about Rockville, Selwyn saw what he called the end of our gold hunt. We came here, and between Caledonia and Rockville we passed six months, studying the miners that were coming and going, choosing our men and making our plans. Between the two towns there was but one possible stage route, and we made ourselves perfectly familiar with the country all about it before we began to operate.

"Once, soon after you saw Selwyn for the first time, you remarked upon our general resemblance—that we were the same in height, weight, color of hair and eyes, and that our features were not unlike. I believe, now, that *he* had noted that, and built his plans upon it when we were yet almost strangers. When we were laying the foundation for our scheme, we dressed plainly, and precisely alike. We were very quiet and unobtrusive, and did not show ourselves often in saloons or gambling places. But when we *did* go among people, we changed identities: *I* was Selwyn, and *he* Dutton. We let our beards grow, and wore them alike, and we avoided being seen together. You will discover presently how this change served us.

"When we had selected the men we wanted, we began to store our place of retreat. We had found a natural cave conveniently near to Caledonia, and under pretense of carrying supplies to Rockville, Selwyn took loads of provisions, liquors, blankets, ammunition, etc., to our cave, and secreted them there. When all was ready, we guided our men to the place,

bound them to us with a solemn oath, and installed them in their new home. We had never brought any two of these men together until they met there, and then their oath held them. When we were with them, we were always masked, and so we were able to keep up our *incognito*. After a time we found it necessary to have one or more go-betweens in each of the two towns. To these we made ourselves known in our true characters, but we always kept them on duty in the towns, and never let them mingle with our 'woodmen', as we called them, except when one or the other of us was present.

"All Selwyn's plans showed that he knew how to control lawless men. They were clothed comfortably, fed on the best, kept supplied with good liquor, and they led a free and easy life. It was far better than working in the mines, to them. And we were careful in planning our raids. No violence was permitted; and when large sums were taken from individuals, small amounts were returned. The men were commanded to respect the old, and do no harm to women and children.

"When the Regulators were organized, we were troubled, until Selwyn hit upon the scheme we afterward adopted, which was that I, with one or two go-betweens, should join the Regulators. You know who these two were; Hedley and Finlayson.

"It was at this point in our career that I began to rebel against myself. I had met you and was attracted to you. In all my reckless life I had stood aloof from womankind, and I began to wonder at the change that came over me. I was not worthy of you, and I began to grope about for a way out of the life that I was living. I knew I had no right to approach you, to win your confidence, under the pretense of be-

ing an honest man, but I had not strength to stay away. The moments that I passed with you grew to be the only moments worth living. I began to hate the part I was playing among the Regulators, the life I was leading among the outlaws. I hated Selwyn, and, more than all, I hated myself.

"One day, in a very bad mood, I broke out upon Selwyn with wild denunciations against his diabolical ingenuity in making everything so absolutely safe for myself and him. It left out the element of danger, or, rather, transferred it to those under us. You can see at once how that was. When we had an enterprise on foot and I acted as leader, I was Selwyn to the men I led, and at the same moment, Selwyn himself was visible, conspicuously so, in Rockville or Caledonia. When Selwyn was among the men in the character of Hank Dutton, *I* was among the Regulators, and beyond suspicion. This outbreak of which I speak was my first difference with Selwyn, and I suppose it was the cause of his sudden withdrawal of confidence. He laughed at my scruples, and took my complaints very good-naturedly. But I could see that he was not so ready to discuss his plans, and was more reserved toward me. I knew that he watched me, too, but I did not care for that. I avoided him, and the Regulators seldom found me when I was wanted. I would not go near the cave, and the result was that Selwyn went oftener than usual—under my name, of course.

"But I am wearying you with my long, miserable story. Do you remember, when I went up the mountains, Margaret, more than three months ago?—but of course you do. Well, while I was there, trying to devise a way to shake myself aloof from old associations, the very thing was happening that I might have prevented, if I had not been trifling with my-

self and my position. If I had been in Caledonia when Stephen Wray came, he should not have been decoyed and imprisoned. It could not have been done without my knowledge, and I would not have permitted it. When I did come back, the thing was accomplished. Selwyn, thinking, I suppose, that the prospect of the enormous ransom to be extorted from Mr. Wray would awaken my enthusiasm, told me his whole plan. He had actually bought the mines, as he had represented to Mr. Wray, and his scheme was to doubly enrich himself—to own the mines for which Wray's money had already paid a part, and to draw from his purse, besides, money enough to complete the purchase, and enable him to begin operations on a large scale. It was an enormous fortune for which he was striving.

"I was half stunned by what he told me—by the boldness and villainy of the scheme, and by its perfect success. He seemed to take my silence for acquiesence. For a wonder I controlled myself, and heard it all. That night we went together to Mack's. I was trying to keep my temper and get all the information I could, and Selwyn was so well satisfied with my behavior that he became confidential upon another subject. He let me into the secret of his past life, and showed himself more than ever a hardened villain. The secret concerned a woman—a woman he had wronged and forsaken—and it set my blood boiling. I will not say more on that subject; it is not *my* story.

"From this subject Selwyn went back to Stephen Wray, and then I learned that Wray had left a daughter alone in New York; beautiful, and an only child. 'If we can't handle him otherwise,' Selwyn said, 'I'll reach him through her.' And then he added: 'Confound her! she's the only woman

that ever turned a cold shoulder to me.' I had heard too much already. I jumped up, poured out a shower of curses upon him and his schemes, and rushed away.

"When I became calm enough to reason, I had but one thought—to set that old man at liberty. I felt careless as to what should happen next. I knew that I must resort to strategy in order to succeed. I had shown my hand, and Selwyn and the others would be upon their guard. But I knew, too, that Selwyn was in a difficult position. Blowey, who, under us, was in command at the cave, was not the man to deal with Stephen Wray; and, evidently, Selwyn could not face him—first, because he would thus betray himself to Stephen Wray, and, second, because Wray would be sure to betray *him* to the men, who knew him only as Dutton. It was upon this complication that I counted for my success.

"I stayed away from Selwyn, and all of my usual haunts, for a week. Then I reappeared and manifested a willingness to talk with him. I told him that I had thought better of the matter, and would aid him, provided the old man was not bled too severely, and was soon released. I undertook to go and talk with Wray, and was about to set out when I found that Selwyn had arranged to send Hedley and Finlayson as spies, to see that I acted fairly. That set me in a rage again, and I declared the whole business off. This happened on the day before Selwyn was killed, and it was this quarrel that Father Miles witnessed."

He paused and looked at Mag silently for a time. She was leaning forward, her lips apart, listening breathlessly.

"Father Miles quoted some words of mine," Cool Hank resumed, "which they construed into a threat, a declaration that something must be or should be done that very night.

He did not misquote. I told Selwyn that he must communicate with Blowey, and order Stephen Wray set at liberty that very night. Selwyn pretended to consider the matter, and to make a partial promise. I would have no putting off, no prevarication. We parted as Father Miles testified—Selwyn trying to reason; I in a fury. We met again in town, as another witness related, and parted in the same way—he, cool, and trying to temporize; I, raging."

He stopped abruptly, and drew back as if his story had come to an end, his eyes upon her face.

"And after that," she said huskily, rising and coming close to him; "after that—what did you do? Tell it, every word, no matter what it costs you to speak, or me to hear. After that—Hank—*what?* Don't refuse me again! Trust me!"

She put out her hand, almost touching him in her eagerness; and with a strange smile crossing his face he bent forward and pressed his lips upon it.

"Haven't I made it bad enough, Mag?" he said. "Do you want to hear worse of me?"

"I want to hear the *truth*," she said firmly. "Tell it. Don't answer me as you did yesterday. Tell me the truth."

He pushed back his chair and stood erect before her.

"I will," he said. "I mounted my horse and rode to your ranch with Monckton. I had some wild idea of telling you everything then; as you know, I was too angry to hold my tongue where Selwyn was concerned. When I left you it was with the thought, the fear, that I might never see you again. I had determined to try and set Mr. Wray free that night, and I knew it would be a difficult piece of work. The men had been warned, through Finlayson, who was a plotter born. He had told them that if Wray was removed from the cave

before the ransom was paid, they would never get their share of the money. You see that Selwyn had wound himself in such a coil that he had to appear to fight, and inform, against *himself*. Things had been very quiet at the cave for some time; no spoils had come in, and the men were beginning to be restless.

"I had learned that the stage from Rockville was due in Caledonia the next morning. It carried no treasure that I was aware of, but I did not care for that. When I left your house I went, by a route I knew well, straight to the cave. I did not approach Mr. Wray, nor see him. I told the men that I had heard that the incoming coach would bring treasure belonging to the Overland Company, and that I intended to lead them, in person, in an attack upon it at Death Pass.

"My plan was this: After a raid the men invariably had jollification; successful or not, it was just the same. Selwyn kept them supplied with good liquor, and they were not the men to neglect an opportunity for a carousal; but they were watchful through it all, and I knew I must run some risk. I meant to go back to the cave with them, after our attack upon the coach; to drink with them, and to seem to be more intoxicated than the rest. I hoped that most of them would be asleep, or too drunk to interfere, and I intended, at any cost, to set Mr. Wray free; to fight my way out with him, if need be.

"That was my plan, and this is how it succeeded: When the coach came abreast of us, and I ordered it to halt, the driver laid on the whip and ran the horses straight between our lines. The men fired upon the coach then, without waiting an order from me, and some one on top of the coach returned the fire. This shot struck me in the shoulder. The

blood spurted from the wound, I felt myself growing faint, and remember nothing more of the night's happenings, except a shadowy notion of feeling myself falling, and of uttering or trying to utter your name as I fell.

"When I became conscious again I was in a small room with a sloping roof. It was well furnished and entirely strange to me. I was too weak to speak, and didn't even wonder or speculate as to my situation. Hedley and another of our men were with me, and after a time they covered my face and began to make other strange preparations. Hedley explained that a surgeon was coming, and that he must not recognize me. Presently they brought in Doctor Mitchell, bound and blindfolded. The men who escorted him, and those in the room, were all masked. He dressed my wound, and was taken away. After a time Mack came to me, and then I learned that I was in Caledonia, in a room connected with his Theatre. It was secret and completely isolated. As I grew better, I found that I was a prisoner. Then the old fight was renewed. I have not spoken of Mack in connection with our outlaw band, but he was one of us; a silent partner, as it were. He began where Selwyn left off, trying to pursuade me to go and extort money from Stephen Wray. You have been told of our last interview, and I think that there is no more to tell, except that I did not know for days that Duke Selwyn was dead, and did not learn *how* he died, nor what followed his death, until the night before last. When I heard it all, and, last, that Selwyn had actually decoyed Wray's daughter here, I flew at Mack and drove him out. I think, if that daring young fellow had not furnished me with a means of escape from that place, that I would have committed suicide before morning. I was beside myself."

He paused and both were silent for a moment. Then he resumed:

"It was the night after I was shot that they brought me to Mack's. I lay in the woods the first night, the night of the murder. The next day I was unconscious, or delirious, I don't know which. You see, they thought I was Selwyn, and I suppose that they had caught at your name, as I tried to speak it, and thought that it must be *Mack* that I was trying to say. They left me there without explaining to Mack, and he may have thought, when he hid me in his secret cell, that he *was* concealing Selwyn's murderer."

Again he ceased speaking and again his eyes searched her face. She stood for a moment mute and moveless, staring at him, her lips apart. Then suddenly her hands went up to her face, and she sank down in the chair she had lately quitted, sobbing wildly: "Thank God! Oh, thank God!"

"Mag!" he cried in amazement; and then, seeing that she did not heed his voice, he sat down opposite her, and waited for her tumult of emotion to subside.

By and by she let her hands fall from her tear-wet face, and looked up at him.

"Then it was not—it *could* not have been—*you!*" she cried.

"What do you mean?"

"Who killed Selwyn. Oh, *why* did you not tell me before. Why not tell me yesterday?"

"Because yesterday my course was not mapped out for me. To-day it is. If you had opened those letters, you would have known the truth. And, Mag, now that I have told you, now that *you* know the truth, will you promise me to be silent upon this subject until I permit you to speak? I have a reason

"Thank God! Oh, thank God!"—Page 534

for this; a strong reason. If I declared myself innocent now, it might injure another greatly. Let others think and call me guilty. I owe something in the way of atonement; a chance is offered me to do a little good, perhaps, after all the wrong I have done. You will help me in that, Mag?"

She looked him in the face long and earnestly, but her look was less strained, and her eye filled with a softer light. "Yes," she said at last, "I will do as you say; as you wish." Then, after a moment's hesitation, "But—but you don't mean to sacrifice yourself for Mr. Dalton, if *he* is guilty, after all—"

"He is *not* guilty, Mag," he said as he again rose.

A moment she stared at him in amazement. Then she, too, arose, looking and speaking once more like the old time, self-possessed Mountain Mag.

"Hank Dutton, you *know* who did it?"

"No, Mag; I don't *know*. And if I did, I would never denounce the guilty one."

"Not to save yourself, even?"

"No; not even to save myself. Don't ask me any more, Mag. Will you let me take your hand once again, and try not to hate me?"

"What are you going to do?" she asked, without extending her hand.

"I am subject to the orders of that young man who calls himself Charlie Carson's brother. I am going to do anything that I can to right some of the wrongs I have done. There's a great deal to do, Mag. Good-bye, then, if you can't—"

She interrupted him by putting out her hand.

"Good-bye, Hank," she said. "When you have done all that you can in the right direction, come to me."

He took her hand in both his own, held it in silence for a

long moment, and then turned to go. "Good-bye, Mag; God bless you!" he said, when he had reached the door.

"Stop," she called to him; "those letters—shall I give them to you?"

"Keep them," he answered, without turning his head, "just as you would if you hadn't seen me to-day."

Charlie Carson was loitering in the hall outside, and he hastened to deliver Stanhope's message, which Cool Hank received in silence.

"Will you put me in a room, Charlie, and send something to eat there?" he said. "I don't care to make myself conspicuous."

Charlie nodded understandingly.

"And will you tell me if Dalton makes a move to go out before I come down?"

"Yes," said Charlie. "Dalton's with the ladies up-stairs yet, and he ordered luncheon to be ready when he came down. I guess you won't miss him."

When Cool Hank entered the office, a little later, Dalton was already there, standing before the counter and looking listlessly at one of Mack's show-bills, which set forth the programme for the evening, and blazoned the name of Aileen Lorne in staring capitals.

Cool Hank approached him and looked at the programme in his turn.

The house was unusually quiet, and so was the street without; the office was almost deserted.

"I think I'll stroll down to Mack's," said Dalton, turning about with an air of indifference none too well assumed, and with the printed name of Aileen Lorne still dancing before his eyes.

"Good!" said Cool Hank promptly. "Will you allow me to accompany you?" And then the old dare-devil look, that all knew who knew Hank Dutton, flashed for a moment from his eyes. "You and I ought to make a sensation there together—why shouldn't we amuse ourselves?"

"Very well," replied Dalton, seeing the look and interpreting in it something of a challenge; "I'm willing. I suppose you are well armed? Shall we smoke?"

"As you please," replied Cool Hank. And they lighted two cigars, and went out together.

"There'll be the mischief to pay before *this* night is over!" muttered Charlie as he looked after them.

CHAPTER LX.

FACE TO FACE.

"*You* want to see Miss Lorne!" exclaimed Mrs. McAffery, in her doorway, to Podunk, one step lower down. "What on earth do *you* want o' Miss Lorne?"

"Wal, I'll tell *her* when I see her," replied Podunk, "an' mebbe she'll tell *you*. I'm in a hurry, I am; an' your husband didn't tell me that I'd got to 'splain my business to *you*."

"Miss Lorne don't want to see anybody," says Mrs. McAffery stoutly.

"Yes, she does. It's a matter o' business, an' can't be put off. If your husband knew how ye was keeping me out here—"

"Come in," jerked out Mrs. McAffery, disturbed by the mention of her excellent lord; and Podunk promptly followed her into the little, stuffy parlor.

"Now," said Podunk, turning upon her, "you jest take this to Miss Lorne, an' come back an' tell me what she says. It's a note."

It *was* something like a note—a small, white envelope, containing what, to Mrs. McAffery's exploring fingers, felt like a card.

Aileen Lorne took the missive from the hand of her landlady without a word, tore open the envelope, and drew from it a card. Stepping back from the door and nearer the dim light, she read these words:

I wish to see you on a matter of vital importance to yourself and P. D.

R. STANHOPE, *Detective*.

For a moment she stood, with closed eyes, motionless, beside the table, the card clutched in her hand. Then she turned to Mrs. McAffery.

"Is the bearer of this below?"

"Yes."

"Will you please light the parlor, if you haven't already, and tell him I will come down at once?"

"I 'spose so," sniffed Mrs. McAffery, and went down stairs to light a sputtering lamp and bring it into the room where Podunk waited.

When she had gone, Aileen Lorne turned to her mirror and surveyed herself critically. She was very pale, and her plain black gown made her look even paler, but her face was quite composed. She smiled at her pallid image—a wintry,

fleeting smile it was—and went slowly down the stairs, the card still in her hand.

At sight of Podunk, standing in the centre of the room, she paused in the open doorway, and a look of surprise crossed her face. But it passed instantly. She bowed to him with grave courtesy, entered, and closed the door.

Podunk returned the bow with no sign of awkwardness, and came toward her, the battered old hat in his hand.

"Miss Lorne,"—it was Stanhope, and not Podunk, who spoke—"I ask your pardon for coming upon such an errand as mine, in what may seem to you the guise of a buffoon. But I must appear a little later, in another place, in the character for which I am dressed, and there was no other way."

"Say no more," she said. "You are better known to me as Podunk than as Mr. Stanhope—you *are* Mr. Stanhope?"

He bowed.

"And I have suspected your disguise before."

"Indeed! when?"

"During the sitting of the Coroner's jury. A very slight thing drew my attention to you. I saw you exchange glances with that young man who so kindly espoused the cause of Mr. Philip Dalton. *That* gentleman I at once recognized as a detective whom I had seen in New York. I expected to meet *him* when I entered this room."

"I suppose I should not detain you," he said, a little disconcerted by her excessive calm. "You must be due at the Theatre very soon?"

"I am not due at the Theatre at all, to-night. I have sent my excuse to Mr. McAffery. I did not appear last night. Will you sit, Mr. ——"—she paused to glance at his card—

"Mr. Stanhope, and tell me to what I owe this honor?" And she seated herself, as she finished the sentence.

"Thank you," he said, putting his hat on the table, but he did not sit down. "My business is most unpleasant, Miss Lorne. It concerns Duke Selwyn and his death."

"Ah!" Just this one syllable, softly and slowly uttered, her eyes never wavering, nor turning from his face.

"I was at Mack's when the news of his death came there," he went on, after a moment of stillness in the room, "and, naturally, I became interested in the affair from the first. Later, at the request of my friend whom you have just mentioned, I gave serious attention to the case." He paused and rested his eyes upon her face—not keenly; kindly rather—and the voice was lower and almost gentle in which he said: "Miss Lorne, would you like to hear how I reasoned upon and followed up this case?"

Silence for a moment. Then she said, her voice, too, falling to a lower key:

"First, I would like to know if you have reached a conclusion; if you have decided upon—the criminal?"

"I have."

Another long moment of silence, her hands fluttering slightly as they lay in her lap; then: "May I ask who?" she almost whispers.

"It is not Philip Dalton," he says, still in that gentle, reluctant tone, "nor is it Cool Hank Dutton. It is a woman—a woman whom I pity with all my soul; a woman who must have been deeply wronged by Duke Selwyn before she raised her hand against him."

Slowly she arose, and came toward him, ghastly white, and with eyes that burned like stars. Her lips parted as she stood

before him, but no sound came forth. One white hand went quickly to her side, and Stanhope sprang toward her, and caught her as she fell.

For a moment he thought her dead, and she could never look more like death. The wrist was pulseless, but the heart fluttered, and, reassured, he carried her to the dingy sofa and placed her gently there.

He made no outcry, called for no help. He pushed up the closed windows, and drew the sofa toward one of them. He took from his pocket a small flask, lifted her head and applied it to her lips. Twice he did this, and when she moved slightly, and he saw that she swallowed the liquor, he put aside the flask and fanned her vigorously with his broad-rimmed hat.

Presently she opened her eyes, and he saw the light of consciousness coming back to them.

"Lie still," he said quietly. "Drink a little more of this." He put the flask to her lips again, and she obeyed him.

By and by strength returned to body and mind. She sat up, and seemed to be looking her fate in the face.

"You are very good," she said. "I am sorry to have troubled you so. It will not happen again. What do you want me to do?"

"What do you most wish to do?"

She considered a moment, and then asked hesitatingly.

"Do—do they all know?"

"No one knows except myself."

"What! not your friend? not—not Mr. Dalton?"

"Not my friend; last of all, Philip Dalton. I wish, for his sake and yours, that he might never know!"

She put out her hand as if to ward off a blow.

"Don't," she said. And then, in a moment: "You asked

"Stanhope sprang toward her, and caught her as she fell."—Page 542.

if I would hear how you made this discovery. Will you tell me—now? Don't try to spare me. Tell it plainly, without thought of *me*, or as if I were some one else, and not—" She left the sentence unfinished.

He looked into her pallid face, her burning eyes, and seemed irresolute.

"It is not necessary that you should hear it," he said; "perhaps it is better not—"

"Yes," she broke in; "I *want* to hear it. I have thought it all out an hundred times—seen myself discovered in a dozen ways—since that night. You may consider it strange, but now, after the shock is over, I feel better, more at ease, than I have at any time since—*then*. Can you understand? A moment ago I stood alone, isolated from all my kind, carrying a burdensome secret—a hideous thing that I could not lay down, could share with nobody. *Now*, for a little while, I am comparatively at ease. You have taken hold of this dreadful load. I no longer carry it alone; I have a confidant. It is a blessed relief. I thank you from my heart for letting it be so. I shall never blame *you*, or hate you, for hunting me down. Of course, you must tell it to others now, and when it has gone abroad, when the air is full of it, I shall cease to feel this blessed respite. I shall then exchange horror for shame. But now, just *now*, the horror is lessened, and the shame has not yet overpowered me. Understand,"—and she lifted a white hand in emphasis—"it is not alone the shame of having killed Duke Selwyn: *that* I must have done. It is the dragging of all my past into the light, the past that linked me to him,—that past which I loathe, and until he crossed my path here, never allowed myself to glance back at. Tell me how you have looked upon all this. I think it will

help to make the reality more real to me, and less hideous."

She had spoken impetuously, but without emotion, and she stopped as abruptly as she had begun.

"When a person disappears, or meets with violence," he began, "the natural thought is: Who saw him last alive? That thought came to all, no doubt, in this case. But the answer was so ready, and so natural, that it was at once dismissed, Selwyn had walked home with a young lady, and some one had waylaid him on his return. Now I, as a stranger, an unprejudiced person, shut my eyes, and reasoned like this: Here is a man walking past certain pits, or cellars, to a point not twenty rods beyond. He has a companion, and at this given point they part. The man goes back past the pits, falls there, and never rises again. First, find the person who could have done this deed the easiest, with least effort, least risk of detection, least danger in flight. You will see at once how easy it was, how natural, to say the person from whom he parted at this given point."

"Would it not be simpler to say 'at this door?'" she asked quickly.

He bowed and went on.

"To demonstrate this, I experimented, walking past the cellars up to this point, then back, as if at the heels of some one, to the first cellar. Having satisfied myself how easily the thing could be done, I waited for all that could be gathered in the way of evidence against the two suspected men. I did not want my friend to discover the clue I was following, and I gave him no hint of it. Instead, I tried, indirectly, to make him think that I more than half believed Dalton the guilty party. As for Vernet, he was more intent upon proving his friend Dalton innocent than he was in finding *who*

was guilty. He looked upon Selwyn as a shark in human guise, just as I did, and counted his taking off but small calamity. As I have said, I had found, in the fact that you were the person who last saw Selwyn alive, together with the clearly demonstrated fact that you could have so easily fired that shot, the first link in my chain of evidence. *You* furnished me with the next."

"I! how?"

"Simply by your manner. When you came before the Coroner for the first time, your composure was splendid, but, to my eyes, it was too perfect. I felt assured that you had schooled yourself for the part."

"Ah, I had!"

"And I thought: If she had not something to conceal, she would not seek to keep back a little agitation, that would seem, under the circumstances, perfectly natural."

"I see," she said quickly. "You are very acute."

"After that, no word or movement of yours during that inquiry, escaped me, and I felt more and more assured that I was on the right track. But when the inquest closed, and Philip Dalton was not pronounced guilty by the Coroner's jury, I said to myself: I will not follow up this clue, unless it becomes necessary to save the innocent. That very night something happened that caused me to go on with the work. Philip Dalton publicly announced his determination not to leave Caledonia until his name was cleared."

"I know," she murmured.

"Yes, you saw him the next day, and I followed him here. By that time I had learned that he was deeply devoted to you, and, knowing that, I readily surmised that his quarrel with Selwyn, which he refused to explain to the jury, was concerning you."

"I told the truth, however," she said, "when I testified that Mr. Dalton did not speak of Selwyn."

"But when you told the Coroner that Selwyn did not speak of Dalton?"

"I lied."

"The thing that puzzled me most, and that almost forced me to give up my theory, was the appearance of that pistol—the one that was taken from Dalton's room."

"Ah!" she broke in quickly, "*was* that his?"

"Yes; do you know the history of that pistol?"

"No."

"That night," said Stanhope, "after the close of the inquiry, Dalton told the story of the pistol at Doctor Mitchell's cottage, and I was an unseen listener. I will not tell it as he did. He had been Duke Selwyn's college-mate, and one night, when they were together, he saw the pistol and its fellow in Selwyn's room. He spoke of their dainty workmanship and admired them exceedingly. Not long after, he visited Selwyn's room again. One of the pistols was still in its case; the other was gone. He spoke of this, and Selwyn told him that he had given one of the pair to a friend. Some time passed, and Dalton paid a third visit to Selwyn's rooms. The one pistol was still in his possession, but thrust aside and neglected. Selwyn was in a dismal mood, and, in answer to some remark of Dalton's, he said that the pistols had brought him bad luck—the one to whom he had presented the first had parted from him in anger, and he was willing to be rid of the second weapon. He ended by giving it to Dalton as a test, to prove whether such a gift was a forerunner of broken friendship. Dalton said that he had always kept the weapon and never knew who possessed its mate. When I heard this

story, I guessed at once that the owner of the second pistol was yourself; and my circle of circumstantial evidence was complete. Understand, Miss Lorne, I have never talked with Mr. Dalton about you; never breathed a word of my suspicions to any one. Mr Dalton, at this moment, does not even suspect who I am. He knows me only as Charlie Carson's brother!"

"You!" she cried; "is it you who—"

"It is I, who, in the character of Dick Carson, have annoyed you at Mack's by paying you too marked attention at times. In the same character, I gained the confidence of Kit Duncan, who told me that she had overheard a fragment of conversation between yourself and Selwyn one night—enough to convince her that you were old acquaintances, and that once he had been your lover. If I had needed another link, this would have sufficed."

When he had ceased, she arose and stood erect before him. He could not read the look upon her face.

"And upon this testimony," she said, "purely circumstantial at best, some of it mere conjecture, you have accused me of murder and won from me a confession! Stop!"—as he seemed about to speak—"I do not reproach you. You are a very clever detective, and you have done your duty. But tell me, could you, upon this evidence, bring me before a public tribunal?"

"If I had meant ever to do that," he said, "I should not have approached you openly. I should never have stopped until I had *verified* every item of this circumstantial evidence."

"And do not you mean to do that?—to arrest me? to try me?"

"I? Great Heavens! By no means!"

"What, then, *is* your meaning?"

"I am my own master in this affair," he said. "answerable to nobody. What do I care whether Caledonia *ever* knows who killed Duke Selwyn? Miss Lorne, I want you to write a note to Philip Dalton, bidding him good-bye, and asking him simply to believe what I shall tell him concerning you, and your motive for leaving. Merely that; and then I want you to quit Caledonia at once. When you are gone, I will try, and my friend will try, to persuade Dalton to go home. If we cannot move him, I will tell him your story, and he will be the last man to wish to clear himself of suspicion at your expense. He is in danger here, and this we must do, to get him away, out of the reach of his enemies."

"Why do you thus spare me?" she asked, her voice growing husky.

"Because I pity you, and I know that you are already punished. Because Dalton loves you, and will suffer enough without that final catastrophe."

He arose as if to go, but she put out her hand.

"Stay," she said; "you must hear *me* now."

CHAPTER LXI.

A WOMAN'S WOES.

Stanhope withdrew the hand put out to take his hat from the table, and resumed his seat. A puff of air coming in at the window, caused the light to flare, and then sink dully down. Aileen stepped quickly forward and turned up the wick with a firm hand, moving the lamp away from the draught.

Then she again faced him, but she did not resume her seat.

"Have you a sister?" she asked simply.

"No," he answered, wondering what she could mean.

"Is there anywhere in the world a woman whom you love better than anything, better than you love your life?"

He flushed and looked half angered, but answered, in a moment, as calmly as before: "Yes."

"If it were possible, as of course it is not—if you were to learn that at some time in the past of the woman you love, she had been left, a mere child, alone in the world, utterly alone and unprotected, ignorant of wickedness and so unable to guard herself against it; and that, being so left, she had fallen into the ruthless hands of a man, who, while promising protection, betrayed his trust and then abandoned his victim—if this had happened to the one whom you love, what would you do?"

"That supposition I cannot entertain," he began coldly. Then his face flushed and his voice fell. "But I understand you—and you have my sympathy. Go on."

"I have spoken awkwardly," she said, "but we both know that a man, one worthy of the name, would kill the betrayer of a sister, the destroyer of his home. And the world would uphold his deed. But a woman who has no father, no brother, no protector, must submit to her wrongs, or be branded. A *man*, who avenges a sister's wrongs, does a grand act; a *woman*, who avenges her own, does—murder!"

She shuddered as she uttered the last word, but it was spoken firmly, and her eyes never left his face.

"Ah," she sighed, "the world is full of miserable women who have in their hearts what is on my hands."

"God help you!" he said pityingly. "I have been your accuser reluctantly; I will not be your judge."

"If the world were as merciful as you," she said, seeming touched by his sympathy, "and if you knew all—But I cannot go back to the past. I was a mere child when I fell into Duke Selwyn's hands, and utterly friendless. On the day when he gave me that pistol, I regarded it as a toy, and knew no other use for it. But a year brought bitter lessons—neglect, ill-usage, contempt, until the worst came, and I discovered myself a thing of merchandise in his hands. That closed one chapter. How I struggled on and lived after that—in sickness, in want, and shame—I need not tell you. How I learned to handle that little pistol and not to fear it—to look upon it as a friend, rather—you can guess. I learned many another hard lesson, and I grew strong to live my life as I had mapped it out. I had resolved never to live a lie, never to go among good women, at the risk of being cast out, and never to place myself at the mercy of man again. I had no wish to die, and never, for one small moment, contemplated suicide. I had found my voice and learned to use it, and I had determined to make it earn me my bread. I would become a singer in theatres, and then I would always be a stranger among strangers. And I would live so simply, so entirly to myself, that I need not feel humiliated by my work, and, at least, should esteem myself the equal of those with whom I was surrounded."

She stopped abruptly and walked to the window, where she leaned out as if to catch a breath of the evening air. The band was braying loudly in front of Mack's, and the brazen notes seemed to jar upon her. She closed the sash and came back to her place.

"Last winter," she resumed, "when I was drifting on in the gloomy sort of comfort that was the only kind I knew, roaming from place to place, singing in some theatre at night, and shut in my room with my books and my thoughts all day, I met Philip Dalton. I can't dwell on that time. At first I was indifferent; then as days passed, and he was still the same gentle, tender, respectful lover, a change came over me. I found myself growing to look for his coming, to regret his going. I became afraid of myself, after all my stern resolves. I broke short my engagement at the theatre where I sang, and fled from the new danger. But he followed me, and was persistent. I made him understand something of what my past had been, but the man seemed mad. Nothing that I said could change him. Again I fled and again he followed, until we both arrived, at last, in this place. I was miserable, and so was he. My peace of mind was gone; my heart, that I thought dead, had sprung into new life, and all gone out to him. When I found that he was here, I began to wonder if, after all, I dared to be happy again. Over and over, he had declared that my past was nothing to him; that it should be dead to us both; that all our life was in the future.

"One day, when I had thought until my brain whirled, I decided that I would dare all in one more effort after happiness. But first, I would tell him everything. I would make him hear me. Dark as the truth was, he should know it to the last word. There must be no void behind us for imagination to fill. I would tell him my decision that night, at the Theatre—he was sure to be there and I was sure to see him. I would bid him come to me the next day, early, to hear my story. I was happy that day, wildly happy for half a dozen hours. Half a dozen hours of happiness in eight long years!

What luxury! I went to the Theatre almost blithely. I remained, purposely, in my dressing-room until I was called down to sing my song. After that I meant to go up stairs, and then I knew I should see him. I think my happiness must have shown in my face when I came out upon the stage, for the house greeted me with unusual fervor. Then I began to sing, and I lifted my eyes to the boxes above. Gracious Heaven! There, looking down upon me, side by side, *sat Philip Dalton and Duke Selwyn!* Years had not changed him; I knew the handsome, smooth-shaven, insolent face at once.

"How I finished my song—for I did finish it, they said—I do not know; it must have been as the dead move under the influence of galvanism. I fell, when I was behind the wing again, and they sent for Doctor Mitchell, who applied restoratives and said that it was my *heart*. He was right. 'Some day you will fall down like this,' he warned me, 'and never get up again.' I laughed when he said it, and prepared to go home.

"Well, that night ended my dream. Selwyn did not know me at first; *I* had changed if he had not. He sought my acquaintance, and, of course, he soon discovered my identity, and that I had learned to care for Philip Dalton. I tried to avoid him, and that sealed my doom. He pretended to have fallen in love with me the second time. And when I repulsed him, and let him see that I hated his presence, he said, with one of the sneers I remembered so well: 'So you have learned that my friend Dalton is a favorite of fortune, a man of wealth. And he thinks *you* perfection. I cannot let you deceive him. I must tell him who and what you are.' I had determined to do that very thing, but his coming had changed

everything; had dragged the past into the present, and made the two inseparable. I knew that all was at an end between Philip Dalton and myself, and I meant to go away again, and as secretly as possible. But to think of Philip Dalton listening to my story from the lips of the man who had blighted my life—I could not bear it! For his sake I could not endure the shame of it; the blow it would be to his love, his pride, his honor. I determined to talk once more with Selwyn, to humble myself, to try to avert this worst catastrophe of all.

"I managed to send him word that I would see him that night. Before he had received my message he had met Philip Dalton, and begun his work by saying slighting things of me, which was promptly resented. The result was the interchange of hot words overheard by the people in the next box. I learned this much from Selwyn, when we were sitting at the table in Mack's *cafe*. The man told it with the look in his eye which I knew well. He was in one of his still, hard, cruel moods; something had gone wrong, and he was not disposed to show mercy, least of all to me. Oh, the bitter, biting things he said, in that cool, slow, soft voice of his!—the pictures he drew of Dalton's horror when he should know the truth, and learn of my shame! I was already half wild with grief and despair, and his taunts maddened me. All the long years which he had made a burden to me, seemed to roll themselves into that one moment when I stood upon the step above him, and, as he uttered the last most stinging taunt, I hated him with a hatred born of years of suffering at his hands. As he turned away and strode back toward the Theatre, I lifted my face to the black sky and cursed him.

"And then my hand fell at my side, and touched some-

thing that lay at the bottom of a pocket in the large, loose cloak I wore. That pistol! I had kept it through all my wanderings; superstitiously at first, and, later, with a sense of its practical use to a girl roaming about the world alone. I had learned how to use it, and had slept with it under my pillow, as Philip Dalton had kept its mate. When I traveled, I carried the pistol in my hand-satchel, and when I went to and fro, alone and late, as I so often did, it was always in my pocket. To have it with me had grown to be a habit, at which I sometimes smiled. I never had occasion to use it—until that night. I think there was Fate in it.

"Until my hand touched the pistol I had felt utterly helpless, but then something like fire swept through my veins. I grasped the weapon, and sprang down the steps. He was already several paces away, and I ran after him. Perhaps he heard the sound of my feet, and stepped aside to let me pass, not thinking who it was; perhaps he wished to avoid me: I don't know. But as he came opposite the mounds, and I was close behind him, he suddenly stepped in between the first two. As he did this, a step brought me beside him. I raised the pistol and fired. He turned, even as the bullet struck him, tottered back, and fell over into the cellar. I heard him fall, flung the smoking pistol from me, and fled back to my room."

Suddenly her strength seemed to desert her; she sat weakly down and her hands began to shake in her lap.

"This is my story," she faltered. "Use it as you think best."

At that moment footsteps went hurrying past the window, and came stumbling up the steps. They sat quite still and heard the loud knock; heard Mrs. McAffery go puffing to the door, and heard her querulous exclamation:

"What on earth's sent *you* tumbling in here? Want Aileen Lorne? Well—!"

"I've got a note," broke in a high, piping voice, and Aileen sprang up and flung open the door.

"Come in, Pop," she said quickly. "What is it?"

"Billy Piper sent me here with this, Miss. He said it was a life an' death matter, almost; and I've hurried—" He dropped the note into Aileen's hand, and himself into a chair, where he sat puffing and wiping his perspiring brow.

Aileen tore open the envelope, scanned its contents, and uttered a sharp cry.

"Read it," she said, regardless of Mrs. McAffery, staring in the door-way. "Oh, can you do nothing to prevent this!"

Stanhope caught the note from her hand, read it hastily and sprang up.

"It *must* be prevented!" he said sharply. Then he turned to the messenger. "Pop, can you make another run to serve Miss Lorne?"

Old Pop stared at the man who looked like Podunk, yet spoke like one in authority, and stammered—

"I—I'll try, Po—Po—well, whoever you are!"

"Podunk will do for the present, Pop. Take this note and run with it to the St. Charles; give it to Charlie Carson and tell him to bring Harry Hatch to Mack's at once. Don't forget, and don't give any one else the note. Hurry, Pop, and do the thing straight; it *is* a life and death matter. Now, Miss Lorne—"

He turned from Pop, who was hurrying out, to the place where Aileen had been standing. But she was gone, and only Mrs. McAffery remained, staring at him, half in and half out

'Billy Piper sent me with this, Miss. He said it was a life an' death matter, almost."—Page 556.

of the room. He caught up his hat and pushed past her as Pop had just done.

"For Lord's sake, what's gone wrong?" the woman cried.

"You'll know soon enough, Mrs. McAffery," he answered, and ran out into the street.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE CURTAIN GOES UP.

Mack was in an ill humor that evening, although there was no visible cause, seeing that the people had behaved unusually well at rehearsal; that both the "nigger singers" were unusually sober; and that a rival establishment had closed its doors that very evening.

Billy Piper, standing behind the scenes and fingering a little note ruefully, wondered at the cause, and regretted the fact,—regretted it the more because he held in his hand that which was sufficient to set Mack into a rage, were his previous mood ever so balmy. What effect it would have now, upon an already ignited explosive, Billy shuddered to imagine. But the hour was passing; it was almost time for the band to begin to bray, and Billy knew that his bad news must be broken to his superior, gently, and at once. So he set out on his unpleasant mission, going first to the cave-like dressing-room below the stage in search of Mack.

"Ain't in the sweat box," he muttered; and passed through it, and out at the lower door, which stood ajar. Voices, speak-

ing near by, and in low, guarded tones, caused him to halt on the threshold.

Mack and his favorite barkeeper were conferring together in the dark lumber-room; and Billy, in the shadow of the half-open door, felt it tolerably safe to listen—scruples against eavesdropping he had none.

"Did you find out how he got here?" were the first words he heard.

"No," answered the bartender; "you know Cool Hank ain't the man to answer questions, and I didn't try, nor go near him."

Mack ground out a string of oaths, and Billy stood lost in amaze. Cool Hank, who had been missing so mysteriously! Where was he? Had he really come back? And why, if he had, should Mack be enraged at that? Billy was on the wrong side of the mystery. The next words were more startling still; fortunately, too, for some of our friends, they were more intelligible. His ears drank them in, while his hair seemed to literally lift itself. He stood motionless until the voices had ceased, and the speakers gone back to the saloon. Then he started nervously and looked down at the note, still gripped in his hand.

"She must know it," he muttered. "She must hear of this at once. It can't do any *good*, but I promised and—" He started suddenly; a bright thought had come to him. "I'll try it," he muttered. And having passed from doubt to action, he was himself again. He went back to the stage, and down into the auditorium, vacant as yet; opened the door that led to the saloon, and bawled loudly for Mack.

Mack set a glass down—he had just emptied it—and came out from the bar.

"What's the matter?" he snapped.

Billy beckoned, and waved the note, but did not come out from the doorway.

"Well, what is it?" growled Mack, coming toward him.

"I want to know what I'm to do," began Billy, in an aggrieved tone. "Here's a note from Miss Lorne, saying she can't appear to-night—indisposed. I think I'd better go and see her—"

"No, you won't. Let her stay away. Make somebody do another turn. Confound you! what do you come to me for? Can't you manage your own stage?"

Billy recoils in surprise. Mack not care whether Aileen Lorne appears or not! Mack forgetting that the stage is *his* stage, and Billy Piper his bondman! Mack indifferent to the success or failure of the evening! Then indeed is chaos at hand. Billy takes advantage of the impending disruption to say, with some show of spirit, answering the final questions:

"I've seldom had an opportunity, but since you advise me to, I'll go at once, and try to persuade Miss Lorne to come out. There's time enough if I hurry, and—"

"You'll do no such thing!"—a brace of oaths. "I tell you, *let her stay away!* This Theatre can run without *her!*" —more oaths.

Mack is about to turn away. Billy can hardly believe his ears. His courage rises.

"Mack," he says, "the programme's been deucedly cut, and the farce can't be got—"

"Hang the farce! Stay where you are, and attend to your business! I won't have that impudent minx run after! Let her stay away, with her airs! *I don't want her here, anyhow. to-night!*" Mack checks himself suddenly and bites his lip,

"I'll fine her to-morrow," he adds, then turns away abruptly and with lowering brow.

Billy Piper glances after him, knits *his* brow, as if frowns were contagious, and goes back to the stage, and behind it to where old Pop sits upon his box, gloomy and thirsty.

"I'll take you at your word, my dear Mack," mutters Billy Piper. And then he goes to Pop and taps him on the shoulder. "Pop," he says insinuatingly, "I want you to do something for me."

Pop does not appear to be much interested. He stirs feebly, and emits a noise midway between a sniff and a grunt.

"And for Miss Lorne," adds the artful Billy.

Pop begins to revive.

"Pop, I'll let you off that farce to-night, take your part myself if necessary, and I'll treat you to a supper at Blue Sam's after the performance, if you'll carry a note to Miss Lorne as quick as you can go. It's to tell her something that she's very anxious to learn, and you know she's generous. It's life or death, almost."

Pop recovers the use of all his faculties. "I'll do it," he says.

"Good; wait here, and I'll write the note."

In two moments he has written these words, on a piece of soiled paper:

Have just learned that Mack or someone, has found or trumped up fresh evidence against Dalton, in the shape of a letter warning Selwyn to beware, as D—— comes to Caledonia for the purpose of revenge, etc. I don't know the cast of the play, but Mack is trying to urge on a lot of fellows to attack Dalton to-night, at the Theatre, if he comes here, as they seem to think he will. PIPER.

"There," says Billy, giving Pop the note; "take it, and

hurry. Don't let any one see it. There's no time to lose."

"Where are you bound, eh!" calls Mack, as Pop passes him in going, as he must, through the saloon.

"To get some sticks and newspapers and bottles, for props for Billy's farce," replies Old Pop promptly. And having lied to Mack, he goes on with renewed relish for his undertaking.

Billy is very uneasy after Pop has left. He fusses about the scenes; goes out to the saloon; does a dozen unnecessary things; delays half a dozen necessary ones. But time *will* pass. The band begins to toot without; one piece, two. Everything is ready, and Billy Piper steps outside, unperceived by Mack, and recklessly resolved that the curtain shall not go up until Pop is back. He walks a few steps down the street, and stops and listens. Some one is coming toward him, puffing, and stumbling, and hurrying still. It sounds like Pop, but comes from the wrong direction. The runner turns toward the Theatre, and then Billy sees that it is, indeed, Pop.

"Pop!" The old man stops, puffs, and draws Billy further back into the shadows. "What the mischief—" begins Billy.

"Wait," puffs Pop. "I gave her the note",—puff— "all right,"—puff, puff.—"Who you s'pose was there?"

"Oh, *I* don't know," says Billy, relieved. "We must get in, Pop."

"Wait. It was that man, Podunk—" Pop's breath has come back— "and she gave him the note—"

"The deuce she did!"

"Yes. He read it and said that, 'It'—I don't know what —'must be prevented.' And he didn't talk like Podunk at all. He *ain't* Podunk—"

"Look here Pop—"

"Hold on; *I'm* all right. I mean Podunk is somebody in disguise."

Billy is now past expostulation

"He told me to run to the St. Charles and take a message to Charlie Carson, and I went," concludes Pop. "I've just come from there. Now, if you can tell me what all this is about—"

"I can't," breaks in Billy. "But there's going to be some sort of a precious uproar. Go in now, and keep your eyes open. It won't do for us to be seen together, and it's time the curtain was up."

Somebody is approaching hastily. Pop turns toward the door of the Theatre, and Billy Piper has just time to spring into the dark shade of the disused double door that opens—or rather does not open, for it is always shut—upon the auditorium, before the man stops directly before him. At the same moment, as Pop is entering at the saloon door, Mack comes out.

"Is it you, Tom?" asks Mack, as he goes toward the man who had just halted.

"Yes," answers a voice that Billy at once identifies as belonging to the favorite bartender.

"Well?" says Mack impatiently. "Did you see the Agent?"

"Yes," replied Tom, "I saw him, and told him what you said."

"What did *he* say?"

"What he *said* was well enough, but I tell you, Mack, there's something wrong! I didn't like his looks, nor his tone. I had to wait in the outer office, and when he came out, that Podunk was with him. I had to deliver your message before him."

"You did!"

"Yes. There were half a dozen fellows in the main office. I saw them when the Agent opened the door."

"Well, what did he say?"

"Why, when I told him, he just turned around to Podunk, and says he: 'How's that, eh?' And Podunk says, as promptly as you please, 'Say you'll be there, by all means.' And then the Agent says: 'Very well, Tom; I'll be there.'"

"Podunk, eh?" says Mack, in a musing tone. "I don't see where *he* came from—but I guess it's all right. Come in, Tom; we must keep the boys up to the mark."

"Podunk again!" mutters Billy Piper when the two have gone. "Something's going to happen, *I* guess! I shouldn't wonder if Jerry Mack hears something drop to-night. Well, let the circus begin. I've done *my* part, and now—up goes the curtain!"

A few minutes later the curtain does go up—*upon the last performance at Mack's!*

As Billy Piper, intent upon some professional duty, is hurrying from the stage to the dressing-rooms above, he encounters, at the door of the first dressing-room, Aileen Lorne, who has just arrived and is about to enter.

"You!" he says, surprised.

"Yes," she answers. "I have thought better of my indisposition. I shall be ready for my turn, Billy." Then she moves a step nearer and lays her hand upon his arm. "Thank you, Billy," she says. "Whatever happens, you have done all that you could to avert—trouble, and to—serve me."

She goes into the dressing-room, and Billy passes on wonderingly.

Afterwards, he recalled her words and her look as she

thanked him. How beautiful she was! How her face glowed and her eyes gleamed! How her breath came and went, distinctly audible and in quick short respirations, as she shut herself into her room, to prepare for her part.

CHAPTER LXIII.

RESCUE—DEATH.

Shortly after the rising of the curtain, and while Mack was lingering in the saloon, watching the arrivals with ill-concealed anxiety, there entered two, whom, to judge from his countenance, he did not expect to see—least of all, together. They walked coolly across the saloon, paying little heed to nods, and winks, and blank stares exchanged at their expense by the loungers.

The new-comers were Cool Hank and Philip Dalton, and they went straight into the Theatre and seated themselves at a little table near the door.

At sight of Dalton, who had entered first, a look of unmistakable delight had crossed Mack's face. But when his eyes fell upon Dalton s companion, the delight gave way to surprise, annoyance and uncertainty.

Cool Hank's eyes, encountering Mack's own as he passed the bar, said to the latter, as plainly as ever eyes spoke: "Keep your distance." And Mack made no effort to follow and question him.

After a time there was another arrival, and this one was

greeted with a yell of surprise and pleasure, and was instantly surrounded by a number of thirsty fellows, who declared the drinks were on Podunk, and rated him severely for deserting on the eve of the first robber hunt.

Podunk returned their greetings with perfect good-humor, responded generously to the appeals for liquid comfort, reminded them that he never had been "No great shakes on fighting," and that he had freely owned to the same, and finally made his way into the Theatre, accompanied by half a dozen boisterous companions, who had declared him a good fellow, and one by whom they meant to stick, "even if he couldn't fight."

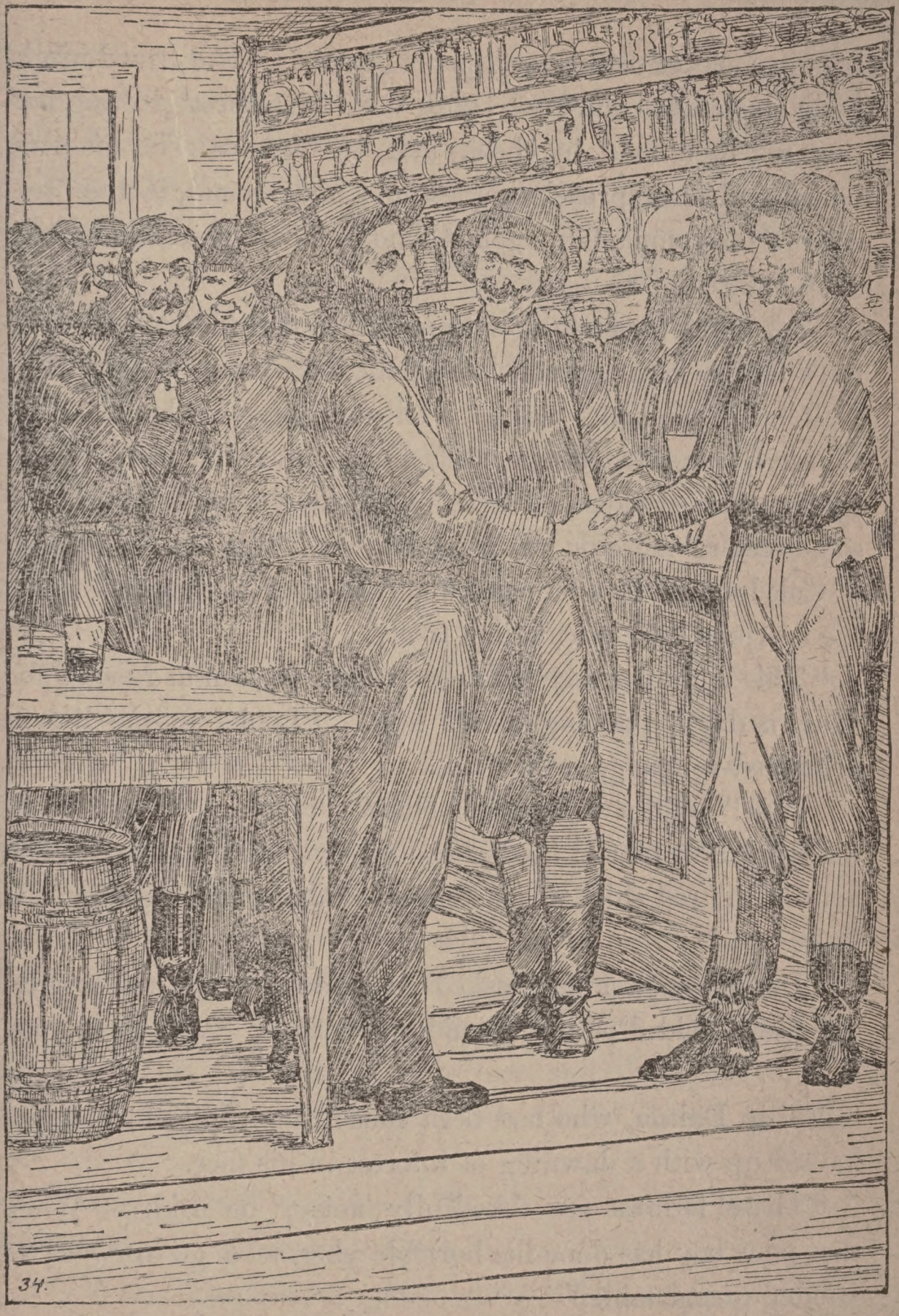
Podunk was, to all appearances, exceedingly flattered by so much attention, and he expressed his gratification in many mirth-provoking phrases. He sat, with his party, very near Cool Hank and Dalton; and the former whispered to the latter:

"Who is that fellow in the red shirt? He seems to have a lot of friends in town. I never saw him before."

"Nor I," replied Dalton, "until very recently. He made himself quite conspicuous at the inquest, and disappeared soon after—" He was about to name the occasion, but refrained from politeness, remembering that he was in the company of a robber on parole.

Straws show which way the wind blows; and little things —looks, acts, words,—showed, to the watcher for omens, the temper of Mack's audience that night.

To see Cool Hank thus calmly sitting among them, was a surprise to all; and many welcoming nods and greetings were given him; the eyes that met his were friendly with scarce an exception. But the same eyes turned upon his com-



"Instantly surrounded by a number of thirsty fellows, who declared the drinks were on Podunk."—566.

panion looks of coldness, suspicion, hatred. The crowd would have clustered about Cool Hank with friendliest greeting had they not been held in check, first, by the look in his eyes, which forbade approach or question; and, second, by the presence of his companion, against whom, it was clear, their faces were set.

Cool Hank was not slow to note this, and he watched Dalton's face to learn whether the latter observed it too. But Dalton's countenance was not a tell-tale one. He looked calm, as usual, somewhat weary, and, during the first part of the performance, decidedly bored. Occasionally each could hear some remark more or less personal, but it was not the fashion of Caledonia to be over particular, and even at that early hour the beerpots were circulating freely.

"This is the hardest-looking crowd I've seen at Mack's for many a day," glancing about him. "Looks to me like a drummed-up gang," said Hank.

"It is!" said a voice at his elbow; "look out!"

Cool Hank turned his head to discover the speaker. The man in the red shirt was stooping to take something from the floor.

"Did you answer me?" asked Cool Hank, eyeing him keenly.

"Me?" said Podunk stupidly; "naw!" And he moved away.

Philip Dalton, who had been consulting a bill of the play, looked up with a dawning of interest in his face.

"These fellows are dreadfully noisy," he said. "When that poor boy has done his horrible clog, let's go forward to yonder vacant table."

"Very good," said Cool Hank indifferently. He did not know that, to the careless-looking man before him, to be at a

table near the front meant, to be, for a moment, so near the woman he loved, that he might, perhaps, catch one glance from her eyes as she went or came.

Presently Cool Hank leaned across the table and made another remark.

"I supposed the men of the Overland Office would have something to do besides amusing themselves to-night. I see that the Agent and half a dozen of his people have just come in."

"Ah!" said Dalton, with polite indifference, and then he arose. "Come," he said, as the music stopped, and the clog-dancer danced himself behind a wing. He pushed back his chair, and stepped out into the aisle. Cool Hank had not yet risen.

Dalton took two or three forward steps, and then his ears were saluted by a sharp hiss. Two steps more; hisses on all sides. There could be no doubt but that they were meant for *him*. Then Cool Hank Dutton came suddenly to his feet, stepped out after Dalton and strode up to the front by his side. There were no more hisses.

Still Dalton's face remained calm. There was no sign that he had heard the disagreeable sounds. But when they were again seated at a little side table, just below the stage, he lifted his eyes to Cool Hank's face and said quietly, and with a half smile: "Clearly, they have chosen between us."

"Yelping curs!" was Cool Hank's response, as he looked about him with a frowning brow.

There was comparative quiet when Aileen came upon the stage and began her song. She sang gloriously, with power and pathos—it was a ballad with an undertone of woe in the

refrain. Stanhope, who knew the emotions animating her, wondered at her self-control, while aware that it was born of strong excitement. The vivid light still gleamed in her eyes, her face still glowed with that singularly radiant loveliness which was a revelation to those who had seen her always beautiful, but with the beauty of the statue.

As Aileen's song neared its close, considerable movement began at the end of the auditorium nearest the street entrance to the saloon, and furthest from the stage. Men were going out and coming in; voices in the outer room grew louder and increased in number; heads began to be turned, and words exchanged. Many of the audience made their way to the rear, to see what was going on without; a few pressed past them, unnoticed, toward the front.

When Aileen left the stage, only one pair of eyes followed her movements,—those of Philip Dalton. And for one moment her eyes met his, with a life-time of love and sorrow, a heart-break and a farewell, in one glance.

Until she had disappeared, Dalton had no thought for what was going on about him. But now he turned. The music had stopped with a discordant crash: everybody seemed to be in motion; the voices from the saloon grew louder and rose to a clamor. He heard his own name coupled with some vile epithet, then Cool Hank's name, then the name of Duke Selwyn. He turned to Cool Hank. The latter had risen, with his back to the stage, where the curtain had not been rung down, and with his uninjured hand resting upon his pistol.

There was a roar from the saloon, and a rush of men into the auditorium. Then came yelling, cursing, brandishing of weapons, clubs, ropes. Dalton heard another oath ground

out between Cool Hank's lips, and then suddenly the meaning of it all flashed upon him. Instantly he was facing the mob, erect, and with a pistol in either hand.

At that moment Mack rushed upon the stage from one of the wings; his coat was off, and his look one of ill-assumed surprise and alarm. It was evident that he was now about to make a pretense of addressing the mob, and equally evident that the mob would not hear his pretense.

Mack shouted and ejaculated frantically. The mob roared and advanced, reaching out threatening hands.

"Stand back!" cried Philip Dalton, and he sprang upon a chair just vacated by the first-violin player. "Stand back!" he cried again. And Cool Hank echoed the cry and sprang upon a second chair.

There was a confusion of yells, a rush of men through the side door near the stage, a howl from Mack. Then something white flashed out from one of the wings, and high and clear above the clamor, a voice rang out:

"*Philip!*"

At the sound, Dalton turned his back upon the advancing mob; a bound, and he was across the foot-lights, upon the stage, with one arm around Aileen Lorne. She stepped instantly before him, and standing thus between her lover and harm, in all the glimmering sheen of her white and silver stage dress, leaned against his breast and turned her flashing eyes upon his enemies, panting heavily.

A sudden silence fell upon the men who were pressing forward, and their movement was for an instant arrested.

In that moment, two figures bounded over the foot-lights. One of them stationed himself promptly beside Dalton. The other landed, as he sprang, directly before Mack. This last-

named person was Podunk, and the other was Cool Hank Dutton. At sight of Podunk the crowd gave a yell, and the forward pressure was renewed.

But Podunk, while the surprise of his sudden appearance upon the stage was at its height, did a thing that checked the crowd again, and threw it back upon itself in consternation.

Next to a volley of musketry, the best thing to distract a mob is a surprise, if it be complete and sufficiently startling.

Podunk had landed as lightly upon the stage as did ever Harlequin, and his movements were so swift that what takes minutes to describe, was over almost instantly.

He saluted the arrested crowd with an absurd gesture, in imitation of Harlequin's greeting to a delighted audience; spat upon his two hands and swung them over his head; wheeled upon Mack, seized him by the throat and waistband, and, lifting him quickly off his feet, flung him to the rear of the stage, where he went crashing through one of his own "scenes," and lay in a bruised heap on the other side.

Then Podunk threw up both hands, and walked to the foot-lights. Two pistols protruded from his belt, but he did not touch them. He smiled, as he turned his face to the crowd and took off his battered hat by way of salute.

"Gentlemen," he said, "*I* know more about this business than any one of you, and I want to make a speech. I want to make a *confession*."

It was the crisis. Podunk knew his audience, and it was now, for the moment, at his command. The place was absolutely still.

"I have played a very shameful trick upon you, gentlemen of Caledonia," went on Stanhope, now quite at his ease, and

"Lifting him quickly off his feet, *flung* him to the rear of the stage."
—Page 572

seeming regardless of the fact the Agent of the Overland Stage Company and one or two others were clambering over the foot-lights. "I am not what I seem. I am sorry to say that I have no claim to the name of Podunk, unless it is the claim of having invented it."

Here he paused, deposited his hat upon the floor and began a series of quick movements that, when they were ended, left a heap of hair, in the form of disguising wig and whiskers, upon the floor beside the battered hat. And a young man, with close-cropped, dark hair, smooth-shaven face, and flashing brown eyes, which seemed to have quite changed their shape, size, and expression, is standing before the astonished mob!

As this transformation was completed, the weight upon Dalton's arm grew heavier, and Aileen's head drooped upon his breast.

"She has fainted!" whispered the Agent, who was beside her. "Carry her out."

"Gentlemen," said the late Podunk, "my time is precious, and so is yours, as I will soon prove. My name is Richard Stanhope. I am a detective, and I came to Caledonia from the East to help the Overland Company hunt out their stage robbers and mountain outlaws. I arrived here on the very day that Duke Selwyn was murdered, and, as some of you know, I took a somewhat conspicuous part in the investigation. I did it at the request of a friend, a detective like myself, who had known Mr. Philip Dalton in the East, and who believed him innocent. I must say no more on this subject *now*—you are anxious to know why I have treated Mr. Jerry McAffery so badly in his own house. I will tell you. First, because he is a cheat, who has deceived you all. While pre-

tending to be a friend to Caledonia, a public-spirited man, he has been, in secret, a *go-between for the stage robbers.* Wait: I am going to *prove* all that I say. He has men in his pay who have carried the news to the outlaws whenever a treasure, or a man with a full purse, has appeared in town. His establishment has been a place of rendezvous for the robbers. He has, connected with this Theatre, a cunningly hidden room, where the robbers or their booty can be and have been safely concealed more than once. Do you want the proof of what I say? Very well. Some of you know a man called Hedley, formerly a member of the Regulators; *he* was one of Mack's tools. This morning he was captured while on guard at the robbers' rendezvous, together with the entire gang. Hedley has made a full confession, and that confession, alone, is sufficient to hang our friend Mack. Listen. Two days ago a party set out to hunt these robbers. It went secretly, and was led by a skillful detective; one who has been among you longer than I, and who is entitled to all the credit for hunting down the outlaws, except what is due to Connolley and Doctor Mitchell, who have been efficient aids."

"Ye're off the track!" shouted a voice from the rear. "I thought ye knew somethin' about this murder business—"

Up went Stanhope's hand.

"Will somebody back there be so good as to mark the fellow who spoke?" said he coolly. "He is probably one of the outlaws' sympathizers. But I'll tell him about the 'murder business,' and he will see that I wasn't so very much 'off the track.' I said that I knew more about this affair than any of you. *I do.* I didn't get up here to tell you that Dalton is an innocent man, but to say that the letters that Mack has been showing you: the letters that have incited you

to organize yourselves into a mob; the letters that purport to be warnings against Philip Dalton, written to Selwyn by a friend in New York—are *forgeries*, framed by Mack and copied by a tool of his. You won't have to take my word for this, nor for anything I state. I've got the *originals* of these forged letters, in Mack's own handwriting, right here in my pocket. And I've got the man that copied them, imitating the handwriting of one of Selwyn's correspondents, where I can produce him at a minute's notice. Now, do you want to know why Jerry McAffery has tried, in all possible ways, to fasten the guilt upon Philip Dalton? I will tell you. He hated Dalton, and was afraid of him. He hated him because once, when Dalton first came to Caledonia, he had occasion to kick Mr. Mack. Mack couldn't forgive the *kick*. He feared him, because Selwyn, for a purpose of his own, had told him that Dalton was interested in the Overland matters. One thing more—you are getting the *facts* from me; you will have to look elsewhere for *explanations*—the band of robbers who have haunted Death Pass is broken up, and Philip Dalton is one of the brave men who did the work. To-night, Cool Hank Dutton, Dalton and myself rode into Caledonia, straight from the place where our friends are, at this moment, guarding all that is left of the Death Pass gang. While we were preparing to send an escort to bring in the dead and wounded, for there are dead and wounded on both sides, we learned that Dalton is to be attacked by a mob—a mob organized *by a confederate of the Death Pass Outlaws!* In proof of what I say, here is the Agent of the Overland, and here is Cool Hank Dutton. You know them both."

The Agent and his men, who had followed him upon the stage, had passed behind the ruptured canvas, where Mack

was ruefully gathering himself together. As Stanhope ceased speaking, the Agent came forward, followed by his two men, who were dragging Mack, bound and cringing, between them. The Agent was a man of brusque manners and few words. He stepped to Stanhope's side and said:

"All that Mr. Richard Stanhope tells you is true. In an hour I shall start, with my men, to bring in the prisoners and the wounded. Mr. Dalton has identified himself with us in defending our rights, and the man who lifts a hand against him will be treated as an outlaw himself. *Marmaduke Selwyn was the leader and the founder of the outlaw gang,* and the people who are so eager to hunt down his slayer may make themselves objects of suspicion."

A hand touched his arm; he turned and saw Cool Hank Dutton standing beside him.

"Let *me* say a word," said Hank.

As the Agent nodded and drew back, he addressed the crowd. So eager were they to hear him that they made no sign when Billy Piper came behind Stanhope, tapped him on the shoulder and led him behind the wing on the right, where Dalton had lately carried the insensible form of Aileen Lorne.

"I want to say, first," began Cool Hank, "that although Mr. Stanhope has not chosen to say it, I think he knows, or believes, that Mr. Dalton *did not* shoot Duke Selwyn. At any rate, *I* say without hesitation that Mr. Dalton is innocent."

"Was it you, then?" called a voice from the crowd.

Cool Hank smiled bitterly.

"You can't ask a man to criminate himself," he replied. "Mr. Dalton is innocent. Any further information on the sub-

ject you must look for elsewhere. As for the downfall of the Death Pass robbers, I was a witness to that, and but for the generosity of this same Mr. Stanhope—"

"Stop!" It was Stanhope, speaking close beside him. He was pale and his eyes gleamed with suppressed wrath. He did not look at Cool Hank, although his hand clutched the arm of the latter; he looked straight forward and addressed the crowd.

"A short time ago," he said, "word was carried to Miss Lorne that Philip Dalton, her best friend, was about to be mobbed. She came here, terrified, and hoping, perhaps, to warn him or save him. Fools! go home *satisfied*; you have taken a life! *Aileen Lorne is dead!* And *there*—" he turns sharply, and points an accusing finger at the trembling Mack—"is the man who has urged you on, and who is responsible for it all!"

He turns again to Cool Hank. "Come," he says, and together they go behind the scenes.

CHAPTER LXIV.

FIRE.

Stanhope and Cool Hank go softly behind the wings. A piece of carpet is spread upon the floor near the wall, and upon this, in her white, glittering dress, lies Aileen Lorne. Beside her lifeless body Philip Dalton is kneeling. He has no ears for the sounds without, no eyes to flash defiance upon his enemies. He holds a cold white hand in one of his, and his face is bowed upon the other.

"Beside her lifeless body, Philip Dalton is kneeling."—Page 578.

A few paces away, Billy Piper stands dejectedly, the tears dropping unheeded from his eyes. Stanhope beckons him, and they move aside.

"Did you see—all?" Stanhope whispers.

Billy nods, and wipes a tear away. Stanhope draws him further aside.

"Tell me about it," he says. "Did she speak?"

"When he brought her in, he knelt right there and held her in his arms," said Billy brokenly. "He called her by name, and it seemed to rouse her. She opened her eyes, and when she saw him she just whispered, 'Philip', and lifted up her face. He bent down and kissed her, and—that's all."

"All?"

"Yes. I thought it was a faint, and brought water and knelt down, but the minute I touched her I saw how it was. 'She's gone!' I says to him; and after a minute he kissed her again, and laid her down gently, as if she was asleep. He's been just like that ever since."

Stanhope draws a breath of relief. He is glad that she has taken her pitiful secret with her; glad to know that Dalton's grief need not be made more bitter, now, in its darkest hour at least, by the knowledge of the sad confession that died on her lips with her expiring breath. He glances to where the still form lies, and Billy's eyes follow his.

"I can't bear the idea of taking her back *there*," Billy says.

"Back where?"

"To Mack's boarding-house."

Stanhope too is troubled. He looks at Philip Dalton's bowed head, and says decisively:

"She must not be taken there. Billy, will you go to the St. Charles, now, right away?"

"Yes," says Billy dazedly.

"Miss Drood is there and Miss Wray. Ask for them; for Mag, rather. Tell her just what has happened, in as few words as possible. Especially tell her what you have seen here —what you have told me. Do you understand?"

Billy glanced at Dalton, and then back to Stanhope's face. Their eyes meet. "Yes," he said, "I understand. I didn't know it was—that way."

"I did. Hurry, now, Billy. I think Miss Drood will know what to do."

"I am sure she will," says Billy, and goes upon his mission.

Then Stanhope takes Cool Hank by the arm and leads him away, leaving Dalton for a little time alone with his dead. They go down the stairs, and when they reach the cell-like dressing-room beneath the stage, pause as if by mutual consent, and Stanhope says:

"Dutton, I want to say to you that it is no part of my plan to have you announce yourself as one of the outlaws, if that is what you were about to do when I broke in upon your speech—was it?"

Cool Hank nodded.

"Well, don't do it; at least not until I say the word. I meant that to be a part of our contract."

"But—" begins Cool Hank.

"Don't argue; we haven't time. Just give me your word that you will say nothing on this topic for the present."

"I'll do that, certainly."

"Another thing; you said something just now, as you have before, to the effect that you suspected or knew—who the real slayer of Selwyn was."

Cool Hank makes no reply.

"If you know the truth, I must ask you again—"

"Not to mention it? Have no fear; it is not my intention to do so—now or ever."

"Well," says Stanhope, glancing at him with a look of aroused interest, "you and I will try to understand each other soon. Meantime, think of me as your friend; that is what I wish to be."

"Thank you;" says Cool Hank, "*that* you have proved to be."

Stanhope makes a step toward the stairway, and pauses.

"I shall have to go back with the Agent's party," he said; "there is no other way. But I will remain with Dalton until —until the body is removed, and he leaves the Theatre. Will you say to the Agent that I ask him to delay his departure until I can join him?"

They are sitting together in Barbara's room when Billy Piper appears before them—Barbara, Mag, and Old Mary.

They have been talking every moment since Dalton and Cool Hank left them. Rather, Barbara, and Mary have talked—Barbara relating to Mag the wonderful story of her father's rescue, as told her by Dalton, and Mary keeping up a steady stream of comments, which Barbara does not allow to interrupt her story, while Mag listens, and thinks, and wonders what Barbara would say if she knew that Cool Hank Dutton, whose champion she has so lately been, is one of those robbers whom she is now anathematizing—for Philip Dalton

has told his story with numerous reservations: that part of it which in any way concerned Cool Hank Dutton being one.

The two girls hear Billy's story in an amazed, awe-stricken silence, drawing close to each other as it nears the end, and clasping each other's hands. When he had ceased speaking Mag turns to Barbara.

"She must be brought here—to us."

"Yes," says Barbara at once. "Yes, poor girl; for Mr. Dalton's sake, and for humanity's sake."

They brought Aileen to the St. Charles, and left her to the tender care of Mary and Mag and Barbara. Dalton came too, and said to them sadly:

"I hoped that she would be my wife some day. I claim the right to bury her as I wish."

"Leave it to us," said Mag. And Barbara said: "We will care for her as if she were a sister."

As they were about to set out for the robbers' cave, a party of men approached the Agent's office and desired to see Stanhope. They were very quiet, and one of their number acted as spokesman.

"What is it?" Stanhope said impatiently.

"Excuse us, sir," said the spokesman. "We want to see things done about right, and we want you to answer two or three questions—we think we've got a right to ask them."

"Ask them," said Stanhope shortly.

"You said that *Mack* got up the letter that we've all seen. That letter said in plain words that Dalton left New York swearing to shoot Selwyn, and that he had money enough to do it safely."

"Yes."

"Well, nobody wants to be too hard on Mack just because he's down. We ask you to tell us how you *proved* this."

"Gentlemen," Stanhope replied, "Your demand is not unreasonable, but my time is limited. I can't go into details now. I suspected Mack from the first, and so had my eyes open. A short time ago Mack approached Charlie Carson and tried to bribe him to let him—Mack—go into Selwyn's room privately, and examine Selwyn's baggage. Carson told me this, and I took the hint and searched Selwyn's trunk myself. I read every letter and examined every paper in it. Then I told Carson to let Mack overhaul the room. Mack fell into the trap, and put that letter into the trunk. When Selwyn was killed, he had two or three brief business letters in his pocket. These fell into Mack's hands. He got Harry Hatch to imitate the handwriting of one of these letters, put the forgery into the envelope that had contained the letter imitated, and placed the whole in Selwyn's trunk. Then he waited until Dalton's friends were out of the way, and got the landlord of the St. Charles, who had just come home, and who was his friend, to look over Selwyn's baggage with him, as if he had not seen it before. Of course they found the forged letter."

He thrust a hand into his breast-pocket. "Do any of you know Mack's writing?" he asked.

One of the men came promptly forward. "I do," he said.

"Well, look at that note." Stanhope extended a folded half sheet of paper.

The man took it, glanced at it, and said quickly: "Yes, that's Mack's writing." Glanced again. "Why, it's the very letter he read to us this afternoon! '*I'm afraid you'll have*

trouble if you meet with Dalton; he swears that he will shoot you at sight!'—and it *is* Mack's writing!"

"I took that letter from Mack's office the very day that Hatch copied it for him;" said Stanhope. He put out his hand and the letter was promptly returned. "Now, you must excuse me. I have no time for further explanations."

"Thank you," said the spokesman; "we've heard enough."

He turned with his men and went away.

"I hope you've left Mack as secure as possible," said Stanhope to the Agent, as they rode away from the town.

"I placed him in the charge of half a dozen quiet fellows, who will look after him the best they can. It was all I could do, unless we stayed ourselves. Mack must take his chances."

It was past midnight when Stanhope, the Agent, and the other members of the relief party rode out of Caledonia. Two hours later, a great blaze lifted itself skyward, and lighted the whole town. It was Mack's Theatre, and long before daylight it had burned to the ground.

"I don't know how it happened," said Charles Carson, the next day, when he was narrating to Stanhope the events that followed his departure on the previous night. "But I *guess* it was no accident. The mob had behaved so mighty well, after your speech and Aileen's sudden death, that nobody thought much about them. I know *I* didn't. Most of us were at the house"—he meant the St. Charles—"and there were a good many hanging around outside when the fire started. Before this, some of the mob had made up their minds to see that secret room you had spoken of, and they went at the 'Place' with yells and curses against Mack. He was con-

fined inside and the door was locked. They broke in, and I expect that they used Mack pretty rough, and talked to him rougher. I suppose that there were a hundred men or more that went through that building,"—went through it literally,—"but I've talked to twenty of them, and it's the same story: 'Oh, yes, I was *there;* didn't see anything done; don't know how it happened; was just a looker-on.' One thing is *sure;* the Theatre burned, and not a hand was lifted to save it. The instruments belonging to the band, and nearly all the things in the dressing-rooms that belonged to the performers, were brought out and laid very carefully in a place of safety."

"And Mack?" asked Stanhope. "Where did they take him?"

Charlie was silent a moment.

"I don't know," he said finally, in a hushed tone. "Perhaps he escaped, but he's not confined anywhere, and hasn't been seen since the fire."

"*What!*"

"Last night," went on Charlie gravely, "after the tide had turned against Mack, the mob was loud in its threats. To-day, since the fire, you hardly hear Mack's name upon the street."

"Good heavens!" cried Stanhope. "And this mob, these same men, were drummed together *by Mack* to hang Philip Dalton! Do you think that they deliberately—but pshaw! such a gang as that never deliberates. Do you think they left him confined in that Theatre, and let it burn over his head?"

"I don't know *what* to think. But if I wanted to find Jerry Mack, I'd begin my search—*there.*"

Charlie pointed to the charred ruin, and Stanhope shuddered as he turned away.

CHAPTER LXV.

RECLAIMED.

To tell how the outlaws were brought back in triumph to Caledonia, how the dead were buried, the wounded cared for, and the guilty punished, would be simply to repeat history.

As one after another of the outlaws were brought before the tribunal and indentified, mysteries were cleared away, and the people began to realize how cleverly they had been duped by Duke Selwyn and his gang, and to look upon the sudden taking off of that too clever leader as an act of justice irregularly administered.

In the sudden revulsion that overswept Caledonia, Van Vernet and Dick Stanhope became objects almost of idolatry. They were followed as if they had been notable curiosities, listened to and quoted like oracles.

As for Philip Dalton, he had literally the freedom of the city extended to him. But he had little thought to give to Caledonia and her people. The first deep sorrow that had crossed his life was pressing heavily upon him.

They buried Aileen Lorne in the new little cemetery, not far from the place where, but a short time before, the body of Duke Selwyn had been laid. Still nearer, and on the same day, Monckton was buried. And seldom have two friendless ones,

strangers in a strange land, been more tenderly laid to rest, or more sincerely mourned.

It was Mountain Mag who buried Monckton as if it had been her own brother who died so gallantly. She was his chief mourner; and Mary and Barbara, Stephen Wray, Doctor Mitchell, the two detectives, and all of those who had made up the party of the outlaw hunters, were there, as, later in the day, they came together about the grave of Aileen Lorne.

Aileen had died "of heart disease"—so said Doctor Mitchell. He had discovered the presence of the malady, in a form sure to become fatal sooner or later, he said, one night when she had fainted behind the scenes. He had warned her of her danger, and she had seemed neither surprised nor alarmed at his words.

Cool Hank Dutton was not one of the mourners at either grave. On the morning that followed the burning of Mack's, he had gone to bed, or been driven there by Mag and Mary, flushed with fever, and suffering—although this they did not even guess—intense pain from his wounded arm. Nor did he rise for many days. At first it was inflammation of the wounded arm, which threatened its loss and even put his life in peril. Then the fever spread from body to brain, and Death brooded still nearer. Through the worst stages of suffering and delirium, and until the crisis was past, the patient was attended faithfully by Doctor Mitchell; watched and cared for by Stanhope, Vernet and Dalton; nursed, night and day, by Mountain Mag and faithful Mary. Through this crisis, too, Stephen Wray and Barbara remained, waiting the issue. It was Barbara who had begged her father to stay.

"I want to take Mag back with us," the girl said. "She half promised before—and I *can't* desert her now, papa."

"Oh, *I'm* willing to see this business through to the end," her father had answered. "And I'm more than willing to be of service to the brave girl who befriended my daughter when she needed a friend. We will stay, Barby."

At last a day came when the Doctor said that the sick man might talk a little. Cool Hank had waited eagerly for this moment, and he asked to see Stanhope. Mag was beside him, and when Stanhope came she was about to leave them together.

"Stay, Mag," said Hank, putting out his hand appealingly. "I want you to hear what we are going to say."

Mag turned her eyes toward the young detective, who confirmed Hank's request, and then she sat down near the bed.

"I have asked Mag some questions," began Cool Hank, "and got a few answers—only a few. She says that Mr. Wray and his daughter do not know that I have been connected with the outlaws."

"Nobody knows," said Stanhope, "except my friend Vernet and Doctor Mitchell. When you introduced yourself so recklessly at the cave, fortunately no one but myself and Vernet heard you. We thought it best to tell Mitchell, but we were all too much the friends of Miss Drood to wish to do you an injury. Miss Drood," turning to Mag, "since we are confidants in some degree, will you allow me to tell our friend just how we stand?"

The hot blood flowed into Mountain Mag's face, but she said "Yes," in a low voice, and turned away from the wondering gaze of the sick man.

"It seems," said Stanhope, "that something you have said has given her an idea that you knew who killed Duke Sel-

wyn. Well, during your delirium, you let out enough to indicate clearly to her the person you believed guilty. This startled and troubled her so much that she, believing in my good intentions where your are concerned, told me what she had heard."

"What was it?" asked Hank feebly.

"It was rambling talk, but sufficient to convince her that you believed that Aileen Lorne had killed Duke Selwyn. I told Mag the truth then, as I knew it. It *was* Aileen who killed him. Mag, fearing that you were a dying man, told me all that you had said to her on the night you came back from the cave with Dalton and myself. She knew that I would not abuse her confidence, and wished to show me that you had *meant*, at the last, to right yourself, and that you were not such a very bad stage-robber as I might think."

Cool Hank turned his eyes to Mag. "Thank you, Margaret," he whispered.

"Then Mag and I entered into a conspiracy, and when, in a day or two, you became rational, and made a most Quixotic 'last dying request,' Mag promptly told me that too."

Cool Hank closed his eyes and a look of pain came into his face. Stanhope drew his chair nearer the bed.

"It *was* Quixotic," he said, "but it was no less noble. You asked that Mag and I, the only two who knew the truth would keep the secret. If you died, we were never to let Philip Dalton learn who killed Duke Selwyn. We were to tell Mr. Wray and his daughter the facts concerning your connection with the outlaws; you wanted them to understand that you were not concerned in his persecutions, but you were willing to let them all think, as they naturally would, that your quarrel with Selwyn had led to his death at *your*

hands. You were content to have this stigma upon your memory, because you thought it would be merciful to Philip Dalton. I suppose, too, you meant it in some sort as an atonement. Mag and I *might* have carried out your wishes—reluctantly enough, too. But you are not dead, and there is a better way of atonement offered you. Thanks to the fact that you and Selwyn changed identities, no one has thought of connecting *you* with the outlaw gang. Hedley was the only man among them who knew, and I took care to shut *his* mouth on the subject. I am going to tell your story to our friends; it is right that they should be acquainted with all the facts. But there is no need that others should know that you were ever associated with the outlaws. *We* believe that you were sincere in your intentions to break loose from them, and that you mean to redeem yourself. There is no occasion to hamper you, in the beginning, by tying this story about your neck."

A little later, Stanhope related, first to Philip Dalton alone, and afterward to Mr. Wray, Barbara and Van, two stories that had between them a connecting link—the stories of Aileen Lorne and Cool Hank Dutton.

The truth concerning Aileen fell upon Philip Dalton as a bitter blow that doubled his anguish, for her sake, while it softened his grief at her sudden death, in which he now saw dimly the touch of that hand which "smites in love and not in wrath."

The truth concerning Cool Hank brought to his bedside, in the form of Philip Dalton, a friend whose regard and comradeship he kept to the last day of his life. The two soon understood each other perfectly, and in a very straight-forward manly fashion. It was decided between them, almost with-

out words, that Caledonia should never know who killed Duke Selwyn; and Caledonia never did know.

It so happened, however, that having indentified Duke Selwyn with the outlaws' chieftain, Caledonia had ceased to care much who killed him.

One of the points on which Cool Hank and Dalton instantly agreed was that Doctor Mitchell, a stanch friend to both, should be admitted to their full confidence, and Stanhope was instructed to enlighten him. His verdict, when Stanhope had fulfilled this mission, was characteristic.

"When society turns its back upon a man like Hank Dutton because of sins repented, it does itself a wrong," said the sententiously disposed M. D. "Hank has in him unlimited possibilities for good. He is one of the few bright souls that go astray as much because of the good that is in them as because of the bad. It is recklessness, not a natural tendence to vice, that drags such men down. And they can be saved always, through their humanity, their affections and sympathies, if there is only the right hand to pull the string."

In Cool Hank's case, the right hand, and the right heart, strong and loyal, were close at his side.

As soon as Cool Hank was pronounced out of danger, Vernet and Stanhope made known their determination to proceed at once to Rockville, as their business in the West would not be completed until this journey had been made. It was now quite safe to traverse Death Pass; and after some consultations with Barbara, Mr. Ray declared his intention to accompany them. The business instinct was strong within him, and he was grimly resolved to survey the ground with his own eyes and see if it were worth while to try to reclaim the mining interests for which Selwyn had schemed.

"I don't like to give up a thing, once I have undertaken it," Mr. Wray said as the three drove away, with Barbara waving them an adieu from the window. "But I was half afraid to broach the subject to my daughter. I supposed, now that things have righted themselves here, and Margaret Drood consented to go with us, that she would be impatient to return home. But she was so very willing to stay that she surprised me. I almost fancied she was glad that we were not to go yet."

The old man paused to look out of the coach window, and Stanhope glanced at Vernet and grinned wickedly. He thought he could understand Barbara's willingness to wait.

"What a strange scene that must have been," said Vernet, to change the subject and sober his friend; "that last night at Mack's!" They were passing the ruins of the Theatre as he spoke, and the remark seemed quite a natural one.

"Yes," said Stanhope, serious enough now. "It *was* hideously dramatic; but fancy my position. I had assumed my old disguise, intending to reconnoitre at Mack's and see what had happened in our absence. As I had been supposed to start for Rockville, of course I didn't want to go in the character of Charlie's brother; and then, while I was talking with Aileen Lorne, came this startling message. Something must be done, and done at once. The plan that I adopted flashed upon me like an inspiration. We had intended to keep very dark about our outlaw hunt until we had our prisoners actually in town, but I couldn't regard plans of any sort, in that emergency. I sent for Harry Hatch, in order to make him tell his own story if it became necessary. Then I rushed to the Overland office, and told the Agent that he must postpone the start and come to the rescue. I could not

have held that mob in check by any less dramatic and startling means. You've got to handle a mob as you would a raging torrent: stem it, or be swept away. Of course, I didn't count on Aileen Lorne's sudden appearance, but the rest I had planned with a keener eye to effect than ever Mack gave to a stage sensation."

"Well" said the old man, "it isn't often that a real life tragedy gets such a stage setting."

And then the talk drifted to Mountain Mag,—who was going to turn over her ranch to Cool Hank and Philip Dalton, and go home with Barbara Wray,—and to the plans of the two young men.

Cool Hank had determined to stay in Caledonia. "I have learned to know the West," he said, "and there is no better place to make a beginning in life. I've had a notion, for a long time, that there's a splendid chance for a cattle ranch here, on a big scale. I'm going to try and work toward that, beginning moderately, as I must."

During the week that Mr. Wray and the two detectives were absent, Dalton and Cool Hank talked much of this new enterprise. The result was a partnership, proposed by Dalton, and accepted, with many stipulations and reservations, by Cool Hank, who insisted that Dalton was going into the thing solely to aid him. But Dalton's reply had silenced if it had not convinced him.

"I like the look of your project," he said, "and I'm perfectly able to put money into it. I need an occupation now, and I don't mind saying to you, Dutton, that I want an excuse for staying here near—" He broke off abruptly. "At any rate, I mean to stay. And if I can help you, you can help me too. We both have a fight to make; something to

live down and forget. Let us make it together, and say no more of obligations. I couldn't go back to my old life in the city now. Work's the best thing for both of us. Let's make a new start together."

And so they did. When Mr. Wray, with Barbara and Mag, Stanhope and Vernet, set out for the East, Cool Hank was able to walk feebly to the window of his room to wave them a good-bye, and Dalton pressed their hands at the coach-door, and promised to take care of him until they all should meet again.

The two young men were to live in Mag's house, and Old Mary, who had parted from Mag tearfully, was to be their housekeeper. Mag had tried to persuade the old woman to go with them East, but Mary had said: No: she would stay where she was, and be buried there beside her "old man, please God." She would feel at home in the old house, and Hank and Mr. Dalton "wouldn't have to worry about their housekeepin'."

Before going, Stanhope recommended Harry Hatch to the tender mercies of his friends. The poor fellow had ceased to talk of returning to "God's country" since the disappearance of Mack, whom he had so feared and hated. He was a physical wreck, and little could be done for him but to keep him from present want and save him from a pauper's burial.

At the last moment, too, in a mood of mercy, Barbara, accompanied by Mag sought out Miss Susan Collins. Barbara asked her if she wished to go back to New York and would accept her help. But Miss Collins, who still preferred the name of Saint Leger, but was more often called "Stockings," by her associates, had not yet lost the spirit of adventure in which she sought the wild West. She tossed her red curls

and declined the proffered assistance, and they left her to her fate.

If Charlie Carson had indeed been Stanhope's brother, they could not have parted with more affectionate reluctance. But they were to meet again soon, for Charlie would return to his home in the East when he had seen enough of "roughing it," and he was cheered with the prospect of having two such "fine fellows," as he thought Dalton and Cool Hank, in neighborly proximity, and by the promise of Stanhope to pay a visit to Caledonia the following summer.

CHAPTER LXVI.

AND LAST.

One day in early autumn, some four months after Stephen Wray and his party returned from their adventurous Western journey, the old man sat in his stately library, musing, with a grave and puzzled face, when a light step behind him caused him to start and turn his head.

It was Margaret Drood who had entered. Not the Mountain Mag we have known, in broad-brimmed hat, short skirt, and cavalry boots, but a handsome young woman, arrayed in a neatly fitting walking dress of fashionable cut and hue; with a bright, cheery face, and a calm air of self-reliance that set well upon her.

"Margaret," said Mr. Wray, rising gallantly and pulling

'Mag, I believe you know there's something the matter. "—Page 598.

forward a chair, "sit down. I am glad you came in. Where is Barbara?"

"She is in her room, a little indisposed, she says. I came to get a book for her."

"Indisposed, eh? Now Margaret, look me in the face and tell me what is wrong with my girl."

Margaret averted her eyes instead of meeting his glance.

"Wrong, sir? Really I don't think anything is wrong. Barbara is not quite well, and that makes her a little out of spirits. It's nothing serious; a slight cold—"

"Nonsense, Mag! I've seen the time when my child would laugh at a slight cold. Margaret, I'm not blind; Barbara has not been herself since we came back from Caledonia. *You* may not see it, for you did not know her before; but she's not the same, though she tries to seem so. Mag, I believe you *know* there's something the matter. Honestly, now, what is it?"

"Mr. Wray,"—Mag rose and faced him—"I can't tell you an untruth, and I think the truth would not please you."

"Never mind that. I've got to hear it sometime. What is it, Mag? I shan't be offended with *you*, at any rate."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Mag, and her cheeks flushed a little. "When we came back from Caledonia, Mr. Wray, and we parted from Mr. Vernet and Mr. Stanhope, you very generously offered them any sum of money, or any service, that they might ask or would accept. And they refused to receive anything."

"I know, I know! Independent fellows!"

"Yes; they *are* independent. You made them a very fine and flattering speech, placed your purse and your influence at their disposal whenever they should think better of the matter, and shut your door in their faces."

"Shut my door! Good gracious! what does the girl mean! *My door!*"

"You dismissed them as if there was no thought of social equality, social intercourse in your mind. You never dreamed of asking them to call upon you, on Barbara, on all of us. You sent them away as you would a footman who had done you a great service and had refused pay for it."

"Great powers! And do you mean to say, Mag, that they *expected* me to ask them to call! I never thought of such a thing! Why, Mag, they're not in society—"

"Nevertheless, Barbara and I have met them at Mr. Ainsworth's."

"John Ainsworth—the returned Australian?"

"The same. And we have met them at Mr. Follingsbee's. Mr. Follinsgbee tells us that Mr. Stanhope is engaged to Mr. Ainsworth's daughter. Now, let me say my say out. Mr. Vernet loves your daughter, and she knows it. She cannot but feel that you have almost insulted him. Suppose Mr. Vernet had refused to take the liberty of rescuing you from the Death Pass outlaws *because he was not in your set?* They are *gentlemen*, both. I have felt it very keenly that your attitude toward them prevented me from meeting them in your house."

Mag turned suddenly and went out of the room. She had allowed her tongue to run away with her temper, and she fled.

Stephen Wray paced his library for a long time. Then he sat down and wrote a short note. It was to Van Vernet, asking him to dine with them that evening. When the note had been dispatched, he began to pace the floor again.

"I'm an old fool!" he muttered. "To think that I, Stephen Wray, self-made out of nothing, should set myself up for an

aristocrat! And I liked that fellow so monstrous well, yet never thought—"

He checked himself suddenly. Mag had again entered the room.

"Oh Miss Drood, come in," he said, putting on a severe face. "I suppose you're after that book again?"

"No, sir." said Mag, firmly. "I have come to beg your pardon. I had no right to speak as I did. It was only because I love Barbara so dearly, and I'm sure she is unhappy—"

"Fiddlesticks! Look here, young lady, I've been doing a little thinking, and I'm growing seriously alarmed. Since my daughter has been out West, and had adventures, and learned to shoot, how do I know what you two may take it into your heads to do? It's my duty to look out for myself. Do you guess what I've done just now?"

"No," faltered Mag.

"Well, I've written to Mr. Van Vernet, and bidden him come up to dinner. I begin to think that we need a detective in the family. Barbara is growing very mysterious, and *you* are particularly alarming. Now you can begin to make your apology; it is quite time you did."

The apology was never made: but Barbara Wray, grown tired of waiting for her book, entered the library at that instant to see her staid and dignified friend, Margaret, kissing her dignified and staid father, first on one smooth-shaven cheek and then on the other!

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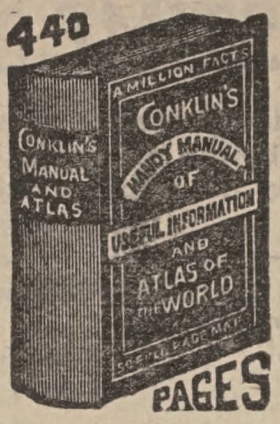

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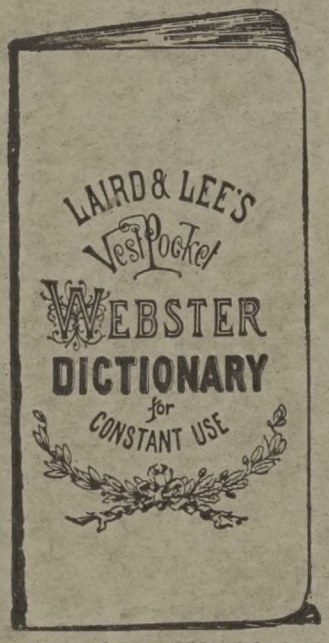

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